
Kara no Kyoukai Volume 03

When I was still small, I once cut my hand while playing house.

Borrowed things, imitated things, fabricated things...

A real one was mixed in with all those cooking utensils

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While I was playing with this sharp toy, I cut myself between the fingers.

I returned to my mother with my hand red and painful

,

I remember her scolding me, then crying, and then kindly embracing me.

Mother said it must have hurt.

I was happy, not because of those words that I did not understand; rather, I was happier about the fact that mother embraced me, so I started crying with my mother

.

"Fujino, the pain will go away once the cut heals..."

Mother said so as she wrapped bandages around me.

I do not know what those words meant...

Because not even once did I feel any pain.

/ Remaining Sense of Pain (Ever cry, never life) -
Asagami Fujino-

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"You brought an unusual letter of introduction."

I'm at a university laboratory. An old man, whose white lab coat suited him well, offers me a handshake with a reptilian smile.

"Wow, supernatural powers? You're interested in such things?"

"No, I just want to know what kind of things they are."

"That's what you call "interest". Doesn't matter. To use her card as a letter... that's just like her. She was an outstanding student of mine, so I'm concerned about her. This place is getting fewer competent people, so we don't have enough human resources. Yup, not enough is not good."

"Um, about the supernatural powers..."

"Oh yeah, supernatural powers... But, there are many different kinds of powers. We don't measure them genuinely here, so I don't know if I can help you. In my occupation, this is an ominous subject, so only a few laboratories study it in Japan. This thing is a black box,

you know, so the real details don't get to me. Yeah, I heard it's getting practical, but I have to wonder. That thing is, you know, something you have to have when you are born..."

"I really don't care about the classification. Either way, I think of them as psionic powers. What I want to know is how people end up with these powers."

"They're like channels. You watch TV?"

"Well, yeah... but what about it?"

"You can compare the human brain to channels. Which channel do you usually watch?"

"...Let's see... I guess it's channel 8."

"That's it. That should be the channel with the highest rating, right? Let's say there are 12 channels in a human brain. The brains of you and me are always on channel 8, the channel with the highest rating. There are other channels but we can't go there. The channel that everyone watches... should I say "common sense"? Channel 8 is the channel we have to be on in order to live within that common sense. Do you understand?"

"...Um, so you're saying we're made to watch the safest programs?"

"No no. It's for the best. The common sense of the 20th century, the channel with the highest rating is channel 8. Since we can be on it, that's the most peaceful channel, right? We live in that common sense and we are protected by that common sense... isn't it beautiful?"

"You're saying other channels are not peaceful?"

"I don't know. Let's say channel 3 is a channel that receives the words of plants instead of people. Let's say that on channel 4, the brain waves making your body move actually move something else. It's amazing to have these kinds of channels. There, the common sense airing on channel 8 doesn't exist. Since the most popular channel shows the common sense needed to live in this current world, other channels do not show such a thing. At the very least, the morals of channel 8 are not shown."

"So you mean not having channel 8 would make you mentally abnormal?"

"Yup. Say there's someone that only has channel 3. That person can talk to plants, but in turn, cannot talk to people. As a result, society treats that person as mentally

disabled and locks them up in a sanitarium. That's what it means for a person to have supernatural powers. It's a person who has had different channels compared to everyone else since the time the person was born. But, most people with supernatural powers have such channels as 4 and 8 at the same time and can switch between them. They're channels that you can switch between when you want to, right? When you watch channel 4, you can't watch channel 8. When you watch channel 8, you can't watch channel 4. People with supernatural powers in society live by using both of them, the usual self and the abnormal self."

"I see. So that's why common sense is useless for the person who only has channel 4... because there wouldn't be such a thing to begin with."

"That's right. Society calls these people maniacs or killers but we think of them as an "unfit existence". There are many people who are unfit for society, but these people are unfit right from the start of their existence. They are people who shouldn't exist... no, they cannot exist. This is a "what-if" story, okay? If there was someone who had both channel 4 and 8 and something happened to that person to destroy his or her body, causing that person to be permanently on channel 4, that

would be the end. Even though the person may have had all the common sense, if unable to be on the same channel as us, communicating with us becomes impossible... because the person is on a different channel.

"

"Is there a way to make the unfit into a fit existence?"

"You can just end their life. To put it more precisely, you have to destroy the abnormal channel. But to do so means to destroy their brain, so it comes down to killing them. There's no such thing as killing the channel without killing the body. If there is, that's what you would really call a supernatural power. That's around channel 12, I think? That channel can pretty much do anything."

The professor laughs like it is really funny.

"That was helpful. By the way, is spoon bending the most popular psionic power?"

"What? Spoons can bend?"

"I don't know about spoons, but at least human arms."

"You mean the arms of an adult? That's pretty amazing . "Distortion" depends on the object's size rather than its hardness. I would think it should take about seven days to bend something like the human arm. So, which way is it? Right? Left?"

"Does that matter?"

"Of course. It has something to do with the fulcrum. Even Earth has a direction of rotation, right? What, it's not constant? Hmm... does such a power actually exist? Then you shouldn't have anything to do with this person. This person has more than two channels. That unfit existence can probably rotate things in both directions. I have never heard of a case of someone having two channels and able to use them both at once; it's too powerful."

"Um... I don't have much time, so I should get going. I have to get to Nagano by today... so thank you for all your help."

"It's all right. You can come as often as you want, since it's her introduction. Oh, and by the way... is Aozaki-kun doing well?"

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Still a bit dazed, Asagami Fujino raises herself up. There is no one in this room except Fujino. The light is off ... no, there was no such thing to begin with. Only deep darkness surrounds her.

"Hmm...."

Letting out a breath, Fujino feels her own hair. The tuft on the left side has been cut off. It was probably by that guy with a knife who was on top of her a second ago. Remembering that, she finally looks around the room. This place is a bar built into a basement. It was abandoned half a year ago due to bankruptcy and became a place where the bad kids would hang out. ...In the corner of the room is a pipe chair. ...In the middle of the room is a pool table. ...Food from convenience stores is scattered around, and a pile of trash is stacked up. It seems these things are creating the disturbing odor. Fujino becomes displeased by the sickening smell in the room. This place is a ruin... or is it some back-alley slum in a faraway country? One cannot even imagine that a normal city exists on the other side of the stairway. The only normal thing here is the smell of the alcohol lamp they brought in.

"Umm...."

She looks around in a rather well-mannered fashion. Fujino's mind is not fully functional yet. ...She still has not taken in what has been happening until now. She picks up a wrist that happens to be by her feet. There is a watch on the severed wrist. The digital screen shows "July 20, 1998". Time is 8PM, not even an hour after that incident.

"Guh...!"

Fujino groans from the sudden agony. There is a great pain in her stomach area. She twists her body, not able to withstand the squeezing pain. Her hands touch the floor, making a splashing sound. She looks and realizes the whole room is filled with liquid.

"Yes, come to think of it, it is raining today."

Talking to herself, Fujino stands up. She looks at her stomach. There is a trace of blood there... the place where she was stabbed by these people scattered around here.

The one who stabbed Fujino was an infamous person in town. He stood out more than most of the others that dropped out of high school and was seen as the leader of the misfits in the area. He gathered people that liked the same things as him, and did what they wanted. As part of the fun, they raped Fujino. Not for any particular reason. Probably because Fujino was a student of the Reien Ladies' Academy and also quite beautiful. As they were violent and selfish, they were not satisfied with abusing her just once. It seems they knew they could be accused for their actions, but they changed their minds when they found out that Fujino hadn't told anyone and was agonizing over it by herself. They found out they were the ones in power and they brought Fujino into this place many times. Tonight was another one of those times, and they were completely relaxed, but also getting bored of the banal act. The guy probably brought out the knife to bring some excitement into this routine. The leader of the kids' pride had been hurt since Fujino had lived normally even after they had raped her. He wanted definite proof that he was the one who ruled over her. In preparation for an act of extreme violence, he readied a knife, but the girl only made a cool face. He got angry at the girl whose expression didn't change, even after

having a knife pressed to her face, so he pushed her down and...

"I can't go outside like this."

Fujino downcasts her eyes as she feels her blood-soaked self. Her blood is only on her stomach, but she is dirtied by someone else's blood from the top of her hair to the bottom of her shoes. It seems it cannot be easily washed off. Fujino murmurs to herself.

"How stupid of me... getting this dirty."

She kicks at one of the limbs scattered around the floor

Am I angrier at getting dirtied by their blood than at the fact that they have violated me up to now?

Fujino thinks, as she is surprised by her own rage. It's raining outside... there should be less people walking around in about an hour. Even though it's raining, it's

summertime so it shouldn't be too cold. I'll soak myself in the rain and then wash off the blood at some park. ... As she reaches that solution, she suddenly calms down. She walks away from the pool of blood and finally counts the corpses scattered around. One, two, three, four... four..... four..... four, no matter how many times I count!! She is astonished. ...One is missing...

"One has gotten away, huh...?"

She murmurs faintly.

Then I will be caught by the police. If he goes to them, I will be arrested. But... will he go to the police? How will he be able to explain the situation? Will he start by telling them about raping me, Asagami Fujino, and threatening me not to tell anyone? Not possible. Such a thing is impossible, and these people should not have the brains to come up with a convincing story.

Fujino relaxes a bit and lights the lamp on the pool table. The light from the lamp lights the whole room. The 16 scattered arms and legs show up clearly. If you look for them, you should also be able to find four bodies and heads. Brightened by the orange light, the room is washed anew with red paint, as if it has gone mad.

Fujino does not care much about this disastrous scene. ...
One has escaped. Her revenge is not complete yet...
Fortunately, it has not ended.

"Would I have to take revenge...?"

Fujino fears the idea of having to kill another person. Her body trembles, telling her such a thing is impossible to do; but she herself will be in danger if she doesn't. Still, she does not want to do any more bad things... Those are her true feelings.

...The pool of blood reflecting her face shows her mouth forming a smile...

Remaining Sense of Pain /

1

July nears its end and my surroundings have started to fill with all sorts of weird events, like a friend who has been in a coma for two years finally regaining consciousness; like finishing the second big job at my workplace; and like my sister whom I haven't seen for five years coming to see me. The nineteenth summer of me, Kokutou Mikiya, started in such a commotion.

Today was one of my rare days off, but I accompanied my high school friend to go drinking. I noticed I had missed the last train. Others took cabs home, but as my payday is tomorrow, I do not have such extra money. It can't be helped, so I decide to walk home. Fortunately, my house is only two stations away from here. The date has just changed from July 20 to July 21.

Past midnight, I walk through the night town alone. Since tomorrow is a weekday, the shopping district is fast asleep. It rained hard tonight. It had stopped before midnight, but the asphalt still shows signs of the rain as the wet ground makes splashing sounds. It is the middle of summer and the temperature is way above 30 degrees.

The hot night air and the humidity from the rain irritate me. I see a girl crouched on the sidewalk. A girl wearing a black school uniform is holding her stomach in pain as she crouches at the guardrail. ... I notice the nun-like uniform. That plain but party dress-like fancy design is of the Reien Ladies' Academy. According to Gakuto, it's really famous to those kinds of people, as they say it's like a maid's outfit. ...It's not that I'm one of those people, but I know because my sister goes there.

"I heard all the students there lived in dorms..."

But to see her here at this time is too strange. She must be in some kind of trouble, or is just a bad student who doesn't follow the school rules. With my sister going to the same school and all, I decide to talk to her. When I call to her, she slowly turns to me and her long hair sways.

"....."

It seems the girl gasped really faintly. She has really long hair. Her eyes look calm and she too looks calm. Her face is small... it's cute but she also has some handsome features. That balance is more like Japanese beauty. Her long hair is cast straight behind her and a

small section of it is separated around her ears to drape down to her breast. It seems the left side of her hair has been cut though. Her fringe is cut straight and it reminds me of a good lady from a respected family.

"Yes? What is it?"

The girl asks with a pale face. Her lips are purple. It's obvious she has cyanosis. She has one of her hands on her stomach, her face twisted in pain.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

"No, um... I, um..."

She tries to act calm yet her words are not. The girl looks rather fragile. She gives the impression that she's going to break down any second, just like Shiki when I first met her.

"You're a student of the Reien Academy, right? Did you miss your train? That place is far from here. Do you want me to go get a taxi for you?"

"No, it's all right. I don't have any money."

"Yeah, I don't have any either."

The girl looks at me in surprise. ... I realize that I gave a surprisingly stupid reply.

"I see. Then your house must be near here. I heard everyone there lived in a dorm but I guess you're allowed to go out."

"No, my house is a long way away."

I tilt my head in wonder.

"Then is it something like running away?"

"Yes, I think that is what I have to resort to."

... I'm troubled. Looking at her, the girl is soaked. Maybe she didn't find cover in that rain earlier but she is dripping wet. ... Since that time, I've hated girls wet with rain. That must be why these words came out of my mouth.

"You want to come to my place just for tonight?"

"Can I...?"

Still sitting down, she looks at me as if she's desperate. I nod.

"I live alone, so there's no problem. But I won't make any guarantees. I don't have any bad intentions, but if anything weird happens, I might get "in the mood." I'm a healthy man so take that into consideration too. If you're still okay with that, then come along. Unfortunately, it's before my payday so I can't give you much, but I should at least have some painkillers."

The girl becomes happy. That defenseless and pure smile also makes me happy. When I extend my hands to her, she gracefully gets up.

... It seemed there are red stains where the girl has been sitting...

I take this unknown girl with me and start walking through the night town again.

"We're going to walk a bit, but tell me if you're suffering. I should at least be able to carry a girl on my back."

"Yes, but my wound is healed so it doesn't hurt."

She says so, but her hand is still on her stomach. It's obvious she's in some kind of pain. I ask her again.

"Does your stomach hurt?"

The girl denies it and grows quiet again. We walk a bit more. After a small silence, the girl shakes her head.

"... Yes. It really, really hurts. I'm about to cry... can I cry?"

When I nod, the girl closes her eyes looking satisfied. It looks as if she is watching a dream.

The girl did not tell me her name so I decide not to tell her mine either. I feel that it's more romantic that way. Once we get to the apartment, the girl says she wants to borrow the shower. She also says she wants to dry her clothes so I decide to stay outside. Giving her a cheap excuse that I'm going to go buy some smokes, I leave the room. I feel that I am really good natured as I'm going out to buy these things that I would not smoke.

After spending about an hour outside and coming back, I find her asleep on the sofa. I set my alarm clock to

seven thirty and lie on my bed. As I fall asleep, I worry about the cut in her uniform near her stomach.

When I wake up the next morning, the girl is sitting in the living room as she has nothing to do. She gives me a bow once she notices I'm awake.

"Thank you for last night. I cannot do anything in return but I am really thankful."

The girl gets up and starts to leave. ... I feel a bit guilty about making her sit and wait just to say that to me.

"Wait, at least stay and get some breakfast."

The girl obediently follows what I say. The only things left are pasta and olive oil so naturally, our breakfast becomes spaghetti. I quickly make it for the two of us and carry it to the table to eat. Since it's so quiet, I turn on the TV and see a terrible news broadcast.

"... Wow, this is the kind of story Touko-san would like ."

I murmur something aloud, so that if she were here, she would be throwing something at me. ... But that's how weird the contents of the news are. I listen to the newscaster who talks about what happened last night.

Last night, in the basement of a bar that has been abandoned for half a year, four dead bodies were found. It seems all four victims had their limbs torn off and the scene of the crime was soaked in a pool of blood. The place is pretty close to here, maybe around four stations away from last night's place. It's strange that they said the limbs were torn off rather than cut off, but the news does not elaborate much on it, and rather goes into the information on the victims.

All four of the victims were high-schoolers, and they were just kids that played around near that place. It seems they did some drugs too, and a person who the newscaster is interviewing is talking about the victims' personal lives.

.....I think they deserved to die, those kids.

Those words flow from the TV and I get annoyed by this speaking ill of the dead, so I turn off the television. Looking at the girl, she is placing her hand painfully on her stomach. Seeing that she hasn't taken a bite of food, she might be really hurt. I can't see her expression as she is looking down.

"..... There's nobody that deserves to die."

She says so with ragged breath.

"Why... I'm healed, so why...?!"

The girl gets up from the chair and runs to the door. I quickly follow her but she raises her hand to stop me. It seems she does not want me to go near her.

"Wait. I think you should calm down."

"It's all right. I knew it... I cannot go back."

Her face twists in pain. The face that bears a pain seems similar to Shiki. The girl calms down and bows at me before she opens the door.

"Good bye. I never want to see you again."

The girl leaves just like that. Her face is that of a Japanese doll, with the exception of her eyes.

They seemed like she was about to cry.

2

After the incident with the unknown girl, I head to my workplace. There is no official name for the place where I work. Its specialty is doll-making, but most of the jobs we get are construction-related. The president, Aozaki Touko, is a woman in her late twenties and she is a weirdo that would buy an abandoned building to make her office. It means that this is not a company, but rather an extension of her hobby. There are many reasons why I decided to work here, but this is my daily life now. I have complaints but I have no troubles. I think I am rather fortunate. There are problems but they are all things I can bear.

... While thinking, I arrive at the building. It is four stories high, and the office is on the fourth floor. This

building situated between the residential and the industrial districts feels rather empty. It's not that tall, yet it seems to put pressure on the ones looking up to it. There are no elevators, so I go up the stairs.

When I enter the office, I see an unusual person amongst the usual junk scattered about. A girl with sharp eyes wearing a black kimono turns towards me. ... The kimono has a fish pattern on it...

"Huh, Shiki? Why are you here at such a place?"

"Sorry that this place is "such a place". It happens to be your workplace, Kokutou."

Touko-san, who is sitting behind Shiki, glares at me. She is dressed as plainly as always with a cigarette in her mouth. She is wearing black pants with a white shirt, and an earring in one of her ears: orange, of course. I don't know why, but she seems to have this habit of always wearing something orange.

"But you sure are here early today. I told you there are no jobs for a while, so you should show up around noon."
"

"No, I can't do that."

That's right. My wallet is not allowing me to do that. I feel rather uneasy when the only things in my wallet are my train pass and a telephone card.

"By the way, why is Shiki here?"

"I called for her. I've got something I need her for."

Shiki does not say anything, but rubs her eyes sleepily. ... Was she walking around at night again? ... It's only been about a month since she recovered from her coma. For some reason, we're finding it rather uncomfortable to talk to each other. It seems Shiki does not want to talk so I sit down at my own desk. ...There's nothing to do, so I decide to talk. Fortunately, there is a topic handy.

"Touko-san, did you see the news this morning?"

"You must mean the Broad Bridge. It's not like some foreign country, I don't think Japan needs that big of a bridge."

I recoil at her comment. What she is talking about is a big bridge, about 800 meters long, that is planned to finish construction next year. The town we live in is close to the port. If you drive for about 20 minutes, you can get

to the port, but the shape itself is troublesome. To put it simply, there is another side to it. If you look at it on a map, it looks like a crescent moon, and a long roundabout is forced if you want to get from the top to the bottom. The city's construction group teamed up with a big construction company and put into action what they said was the solution to the public complaints. They are building a straight route across the tips of the crescent shape in the form of a bridge. ... Of course, most of the money to build this is coming from our taxes. I think it is a typical case of the government saying they are solving public complaints which did not exist from the start, only resulting in more public complaints. The bridge is also to have museums, aquariums, big parking lots and such, and you can't really tell whether it's a bridge or an amusement park. It was called Baybridge until recently but according to what Touko-san is saying, I guess its name has officially been announced as Broad Bridge. Both Touko-san and I do not like the idea of this bridge.

"But Touko-san, even though you hate the idea, you already have a space in there for your gallery."

"It's not of my will. A person I know just gave me that space as a payment. I could just sell it off but since I have

some relations with the Asagami construction company, I can't just do that. Geez, a place that won't make me money is worthless."

From the way she's talking, she seems to be having trouble with money. I get a really bad feeling.

"Um, I don't want to say this so bluntly, but can I have my pay?"

"Kokutou, about that... unfortunately, I don't have any money. It's unfortunate, but I'll have to pay you all next month."

Touko-san declares so calmly. She sounds like I'm the bad guy instead.

"Wait a minute! You had 1.12 million yen in the bank yesterday! How could you say it's all gone!?"

Touko-san replies, while rocking on her chair, that it's because she used it all. Shiki is looking at Touko-san with some jealousy. ...Certainly, Touko-san looks like she's having fun in that chair. No, I don't care about that right now.

"What did you use the money on, Touko-san?"

"Oh, what I bought was this boring thing. It's an Ouija board from the Victorian age. I can't expect much out of its effect, but it's not totally worthless because it's over a hundred years old. No matter how uninteresting it is, some mana and a large amount of time will give it some additional value. Well, it still makes no difference even if it's useless. If I have to give a reason for buying it, you could say it's part of my hobby."

I just don't understand this person. This person called Aozaki Touko is a magus. I always think how much better it would have been if she was just a magician or something, but that's the truth so I have to accept it. The magus continues her excuse.

"It suddenly appeared on sale, so I bought it on impulse. Don't get so angry. I'm out of money too."

... Don't be angry? That's asking too much. As I have seen many miracles from her, I'd thought this part of her was rather playful, but I cannot be that tolerant today.

"So is that it? I'm not getting paid this month?"

"Yeah. Get some money from somewhere else."

I get up from my seat.

"Then I'm going to go find some money to live off of this month so I'm leaving early. Is that all right?"

"Fine. By the way, Kokutou, I need to ask you a favor."

Touko-san says this in a different tone. Maybe it has to do something with the fact that Shiki is here... I calm down and stop.

"What is it, Touko-san?"

"Can you lend me some money? I'm broke as you can see."

"..... I refuse with all my might."

I close the door hard and leave the office.

After looking at the conversation between Mikiya and Touko for a while, Shiki finally opens her mouth.

"Touko, about that thing."

"That's right. I don't really like to accept this kind of a job but I won't be able to live without money.Geez, I'm going mad over money when I'm not an alchemist. This is all because Kokutou won't lend me any money."

Touko sticks her cigarette into the ashtray saying she's in a bad mood. Shiki thinks Mikiya is probably in a worse mood than her.

"Well, about that incident last night..."

"I've heard enough. I know what's going on."

"I see..... I only explained to you the scene of the crime , but you already know? You're pretty sharp."

Touko looks meaningfully at Shiki. Touko has only explained the results of the murder that occurred between 7PM and 8PM last night and Shiki is saying she understood what kind of crime it was. This is definite proof that Shiki is a person closer to the world Touko lives in.

"The client has some idea of the killer. Your job is to take her under your care if possible, but if she happens to fight back even slightly... the client said to kill her."

Shiki nods. The job description is easy. Find the killer, and kill her.

"But what about after that?"

"If you happen to kill her, they will clean it up and treat it as an accident. For the client, she is already socially dead. It is not against the law to kill a dead person. What do you want to do? I think this job rather suits you."

"I don't even need to answer that question."

Saying that, Shiki starts to walk out the office.

"You're in such a hurry. Were you hungry, Shiki?"

Shiki does not answer.

"Here's her picture and her status. What were you going to do without knowing what she looks like?"

Shiki looks at Touko, who throws her the file containing the information. It drops to the floor.

"I don't need it. That killer is definitely of my kind. ... So if we were to meet, we'd try to kill each other at that very instant."

Shiki departs from the office, leaving only the sound of her kimono and a cold glare.

It can't be helped. After leaving the office, I decide to borrow some money from a friend of mine. We choose to meet at the cafeteria of the college that I quit in June. A bit after noon, Gakuto arrives. He has grown much bigger since high school. When I tell him what I came for, he makes a troubled face.

"I'm surprised. Calling for someone just to borrow money? Are you really Kokutou Mikiya?"

"Yeah. You're special to me. You should be happy about that."

"Heh, who would be? Besides, why don't you go borrow from your relatives?"

"I haven't seen my parents ever since that fight I got into with them when I dropped out of college. How do you expect me to go back and ask such a thing now?"

"Haha, you're pretty stubborn. Was it a big fight?"

"That has nothing to do with you. So, are you going to lend me some money or not?"

"Hm? You're in a pretty bad mood today."

I glare at him saying that it's none of his business, but Gakuto agrees to lend me some money.

"If I put your name out, I bet I would be able to collect fifty or sixty thousand yen quite quickly... and if you still need more, I could lend you some of my money. But, not for free."

... It seems he also has a favor to ask of me. Gakuto looks around, and makes sure no one is listening.

"Well, to put it simply, I want you to look for someone. It's one of our underclassmen, but he hasn't returned home. It seems he's been involved in a strange crime."

Gakuto's story is unsettling. The name of the missing underclassman is Minato Keita. He has been missing since last night and Gakuto says that he was a member of the group that was killed last night. Minato Keita contacted one of his friends last night, but it seems he was acting strangely, so that friend went to Gakuto for help.

"Keita was saying something like he was going to be killed. That's the only call he made and he doesn't even answer his cell phone now. According to the guy who talked to him, he was really screwed up."

Screwed up... he must mean drugs... Easy drugs for beginners are cheap and relatively easy to get nowadays. Even a high schooler could get their hands on L if they tried; but they shouldn't be trying in the first place...

"... Hey now. Do you think such a violent world suits me?"

"What are you saying? Looking for people is your specialty."

I grow quiet.

"That guy Keita, does he do drugs?"

"No, the ones who used them were the ones who were killed. Don't you remember Keita? He's one of the kids that liked you."

... During high school, I was liked by some underclassmen for some reason. Maybe because I'm a friend of Gakuto or something.

"It would make things easier if he were just tripping on a new drug. What kind of drugs do they use? Uppers or Downers?"

There are two types of drugs: Uppers, the ones that make you mentally high and feel good; and Downers, the ones that make you depressed. The one Gakuto names is an Upper.

"It's terrible if he's using drugs to escape his fears. The killer really might be after this kid. All right, I'll look into this. Tell me about his friends."

Gakuto hands me an address book as if he was ready for me to say so. Having lots of friends is characteristic of the members of that group and it seems he's no exception. Many names with their cell phone numbers; along with each group's hangout place, are written.

"I'll contact you once I find him. I might be able to get him under my protection but you wouldn't care, would you?"

By "protection", I mean handing him over to Daisuke Nii-san, a cop. Gakuto nods, understanding. We reach an agreement. To start off my search, I borrow about twenty thousand yen from him.

After saying goodbye to Gakuto, I decide to go to the murder scene. I feel that I'll have to really try if I'm to find him. Even though I know I shouldn't concern myself with these matters, I also know that this kid is in danger, so I could not decline Gakuto.

/2

The phone starts to ring. It stops after five rings and switches to the answering machine. After a beeping noise, I hear a familiar voice leaving a message.

"Good morning, Shiki. Can you do me a favor? I'm supposed to meet Azaka at a cafe called Ahnen erbe near the station at noon but I don't think I can make it. You have nothing to do, right? Can you go there and tell her I can't come?"

The caller hangs up. ... I move my tired body and look at the clock by the bed... "July 22, 7:23AM". It's only been about four hours since I came home. My body still wants sleep, maybe because I've been walking around town until three in the morning ever since I accepted Touko's job. I pull up my sheets. The summer heat does not really matter to me. I was able to tolerate hot and cold weather rather well as a kid, and it still seems that way now. As I lie there for a while, the phone rings again. It switches to the answering machine and this time, I hear a voice I'd rather not hear.

"It's me. Did you see the news? You didn't see it, right? You don't have to see it. I didn't see it either."

... I always thought so, but now I'm confident. The way she thinks is far removed from the way I think. One should not understand the real meaning behind Touko's words.

"There were three deaths last night. Another one of those suicides jumping off a building and two "crimes of passion". None of these are in the news so I'm guessing they were all treated as accidents. But there's one strange case. If you want to know more, come to my place. Actually, you don't have to. Come to think of it, this will do. All right... I'll put it simply so even you'll understand with that sleepy head of yours. Just now, there was another victim."

The caller hangs up. I get pissed off. It has nothing to do with me, even if there is another victim. Even the things around me are uncertain, so this information is useless to me. The death of someone I don't even know about makes less impression on me than the sunlight striking my body.

I finally get up when the weariness in me goes away. I make breakfast the same way the previous Shiki has done for 16 years of her life. I eat it and get ready to go outside. I put on a simple orange kimono today. Since I'll

be walking around town, this is what I prefer. Even my choice of clothing is only a habit from the past. I bite my tongue at the feeling that I'm looking at someone else from outside. Two years ago, when Ryougi Shiki was still 17, I wasn't like this. It's not that the two years of coma changed me. ... The empty two years brought me something else. It feels like I am not moving of my own volition. I always get this feeling that the strings called "16 years as Ryougi Shiki" are moving me like a puppet. But it has to be just my feelings. No matter how much I curse myself for being empty and fictitious, in the end, I am moving of my own will. It is impossible for anything other than me to interfere with that.

When I finish changing, the time is almost eleven. I repeat the first message on the answering machine. The voice I have heard many times in the past repeats itself. The voice that was lost in the air is recorded like this.

...Kokutou Mikiya

The last person I saw two years ago...

The classmate that saw me let my guard down two years ago...

I know my past with him, but only the vision of our last moment is not there. No, the memory of the year since I got to know him is full of holes. Many important parts are missing. Why Shiki got in that accident.... Why she was looking at Mikiya's face at that moment... It would be really handy if the forgotten memories were recorded somewhere. I am concerned about the missing memories and it is causing me to not be able to talk to Mikiya naturally.

... The answering machine stops. It's strange that my worries go away a bit when I hear his voice. It makes me feel like I have a firm foundation, but there's no way something like a voice could be a foundation. That should be an illusion too. It probably is an illusion. The only reality I can feel now is the burning excitement I get when I kill people.

Ahnen erbe turns out to be an antique cafe. I check the name written in German and go inside. It's past noon but there aren't many customers inside. I don't know how

they built it, but it is dark inside. Only the tables near the door are lit - the back of the cafe, with the counters, is rather dark. The only light is coming through the four square windows in the walls. The tables by those windows are also lit, as if cut out of the darkness. Maybe it's because of the strong sunlight but the contrast feels rather majestic. Kokutou Azaka is sitting at the table in the very back. Two girls in western-style uniform are waiting for Mikiya, side by side.

"Two...?"

That's not what I heard. According to Mikiya, only Azaka should be waiting. I didn't hear about this other girl. I look at them as I walk towards them. They both have long straight black hair. They have similar features and they are beautiful, fit for students at a Ladies Academy, even though their atmospheres are totally the opposite. Azaka has firm eyes and the strength to face up anything: even her ladylike attitude can't hide this. Mikiya was liked because of his personal charm, but Azaka would be the one that would be admired because of her strictness. The girl next to Azaka looks rather weak. Her posture looks firm and graceful, but she gives the impression that she might break down any second.

"Azaka."

I come close to their table and call out. Azaka looks at me and frowns.

"Ryougi... Shiki."

The voice is filled with enmity. She doesn't even try to hide it. That ladylike exterior is just a facade.

"I am waiting for Nii-san. I have nothing to do with you."

Azaka says, staying calm.

"I have a message from that Nii-san of yours. He said he can't make it. He ditched you."

Azaka gasps. Maybe because the fact that he could not come is a big shock, or maybe because I was the one to come tell her that.

"Shiki, it must be your doing...!"

Azaka's fist trembles. I guess she's shocked that I came.

"Don't be stupid. I'm a victim too. He just selfishly told me to inform you that he can't make it."

Azaka looks at me with fire in her eyes. The girl next to her tries to calm Azaka, as though she might start throwing things if she weren't placated.

"Kokutou-san, everyone's surprised."

A thin voice. I step back.

"..... You're right, today was supposed to be for you. Sorry Fujino, it was wrong for me to get angry."

Azaka apologizes to the girl called Fujino. I look at the calm-looking girl. She is looking at me too.

"Does it..... not hurt?"

I say so unconsciously. The girl does not answer but just stares at me. Showing no interest, like watching a scenery, and inorganic like a bug. I now have two convictions in me. The intuition that this girl is my enemy and the actual feeling that she cannot be.

"... No, it can't be you."

In the end, I decide to trust my feelings. There is no way this girl, Fujino, would be able to enjoy murder. There is no reason for her to. No, first of all, it would be impossible for her thin arms to tear off things like human limbs. It would be a different story if she had abnormal eyes like me... I quickly lose interest in this girl and talk to Azaka.

"That's all. Do you have any messages for him?"

""Nii-san, please quickly break your ties with such a woman.""

Azaka really leaves this kind of message.

""Nii-san, please quickly break your ties with such a woman.""

Azaka seriously told the woman in the kimono, the one called Shiki. I feel rather uneasy due to the thick and heavy air surrounding them. It feels like they have knives aimed at each other's throats and are looking for

openings to actually cut each other. I get timid within this tight atmosphere. Now, I can only pray that nothing will occur. Fortunately, they stop talking and the woman wearing the kimono leaves gracefully. I stare at her back as she leaves. Shiki spoke with a very masculine tone. I couldn't tell her age because of that, but maybe she's around my age. Her last name was Ryougi... maybe it's *that* Ryougi; then her expensive looking kimono makes sense. I could see some designs worked into her kimono. If she is of the Ryougi, it's no surprise that she would have her own kimono maker.

"..... She was a beautiful person."

Azaka nods to my murmur. I think she's amazing for answering honestly even when she hates that person.

"But she is just as scary. ... I don't like that person."

Azaka looks surprised. Her surprise is completely natural. Even I am surprised at this feeling. Because probably for the first time in my life, I feel repulsion toward someone.

"That's unexpected. I thought you were someone that wouldn't hate anybody, but I guess I was wrong."

"Hate.....?"

... Dislike is the same as hate? I never thought so. I just feel that I cannot get along with that person. I try closing my eyes. Ryougi Shiki. Her ominous black hair, ominous white skin, and those ominous, bottomless, empty eyes. She was looking at me, so I looked back at her. That's why we saw what was hiding behind us. She only knows blood. She kills of her own will. She tries to hurt others. ..
. That woman is a killer.

But I am different. I think I am different. It's because I have never wanted to do such a thing. In the darkness behind my closed eyes, I repeat this over and over. But her figure would not disappear. ... We have not talked even once, but her figure is engraved into my mind.

"I'm sorry, Fujino. I ruined your day off."

I open my eyes to Azaka's words. I smile, like I have practiced.

"It's all right. I did not feel like it anyways."

"You do look quite pale. It's hard to tell because you're pretty white to begin with."

I did not feel like it for another reason, but I nod at her words anyways. ... I know my body is not doing well by its reaction, but I did not notice that it was bad enough to show on my face.

"I guess it can't be helped. I'll ask Mikiya myself, so do you want to go home for today?"

Azaka is worried about my health. I thank her.

"But is that message to your brother all right?"

"It's fine. I don't even know how many times I told him that anyways. He should be used to it. To tell you the truth, this a curse. Words that are repeated over and over can twist reality to lean towards that word. Really, a girly curse. It's sad and pitiful."

I don't know how serious she is but she explains so. I'm used to her impulsiveness. I decide to listen quietly to Azaka's beautiful voice. ... She is always number one academically in our school and she even ranks in the top ten nationwide. Azaka is a bit strange and has this gentlemanly side to her. Azaka is one of my friends from Reien Academy. Both of us entered that school from our high school. Since Reien is an "escalator" school from elementary school, it's rare for people to come starting

from high school like us. We met because of that and are close enough that we even go out sometimes on weekends. Today, I was supposed, through Azaka, to have her brother look for someone.

I went to a local middle school and when I was there, a Senpai from a different school talked to me at an event. ... I had been depressed recently, but I was saved by thinking about this Senpai. When I told Azaka about it, she said we should look for this person. It happens that her brother is also from this area and he knows a lot of people around here. She said he is really good at looking for people our age. ... It's not that I really wanted to see him, but we ended up deciding to look for this person with me not being able to refuse the pushy Azaka. We were waiting for her brother today but it seems he could not come. ... I am relieved in a way.

I am not really into this whole thing because... I accidentally ran into him two days ago. At that time, I was able to say what I couldn't say three years ago. Since I have done what I wanted to do, there is no point in looking for this person anymore. Maybe Azaka's brother couldn't come because God knew I didn't need him anymore.

"Let's get going. It's hard to stay here over an hour buying just drinks."

Azaka gets up. Even though she should be sad about not being able to see her brother, she still gets up gracefully. Sometimes, she is really manly. Maybe because of the way she talks. Her formal tone disappears like just now and becomes cool like a man. It's not that she's disguising herself, but that's just a part of her. I really like this friend of mine. That's why I shouldn't see her anymore.

"Azaka. Please go back to the dorm by yourself. I will be staying at my parents' house tonight again."

"Really? That's fine but Sister will be glaring at you if you stay out too much. You should restrain yourself."

Waving her hand, Azaka leaves the cafe. Being alone, I take a glance at the sign. "Ahnen erbe": it means "ancestral inheritance" in German.

After Azaka leaves, I start walking aimlessly. It is a lie that I am going back to my parents' house. There is no place for me to go back to now. From that night two days ago, I have not even been going to school. My father has probably been contacted already for unexcused absences. They will ask me what I was doing if I go back home. I am not good at telling lies so I might slip everything out. If that happens... father will contempt me.

I am my mother's child from her former marriage. Father only needed mother's house and land, so I was just something on the side since that time. That is why I worked hard not to be hated. A faithful woman like my mother, a student my father can be proud of, a normal girl nobody would be suspicious of..... .. I always wanted to be that way.

Not for someone else, but for myself. I always dreamed that, and it has protected me. But it came to an end. Such magic is not around me no matter how much I look. I continue walking, the sun is starting to set. I walk past many irrelevant people and many stoplights which blink insensibly. People older than me, people younger than me, everyone looks so happy. My heart contracts in

pain. I think of something and pinch my cheek. I do not feel anything. I pinch harder. Nothing. When I give up and let go, I notice that my fingertips are red. I guess I pinched hard enough that my nails dug into my skin. But I still feel nothing. I do not feel that I am alive.

"Fufu..."

I laugh thinking it's funny. Why does my heart feel pain when I myself do not feel any pain? First of all, what is heart? Is it my heart that's hurt or my brain? When the brain receives any words that are directed to attack an individual called Asagami Fujino, it creates a wound as protection. Since a wound lets a person know it hurts, whatever story I come up with is only a medicine that soothes the pain. That is why even though I cannot feel pain, I still understand pain in my heart. But that is probably just an illusion. Definitely an illusion. Real pain cannot be cured just by words. One quickly forgets a pain in their heart because it is so trivial; but a wound on your body gives you pain as long as the wound is there. That is a strong proof of life.

If my heart is my brain, then my brain should get a wound. Then I should be able to feel pain; like my days up to now. If the memories of the days I was violated by those people became wounds...

..... I remember again their laughter and their scary faces. All those times I was violated and threatened. When that guy with the knife jumped on me, my stomach felt hot and the clothes around my stomach area were cut. When I thought I was going to get stabbed, I became violent. After I was done with them, I realized that the heat in my stomach was pain. My heart shrinks once more. "I won't forgive them." Those words repeat in my head over and over.

"Guh....."

My knee wobbles. It comes again. My stomach is burning. It feels like an invisible hand is clutching at my insides.

I feel like vomiting. I do not feel that way normally. I feel dizzy. I abruptly lose consciousness in this situation normally. My arm is numb. I confirm it is there by looking at it normally. It really hurts. Yes, I feel alive.

The place I was stabbed is starting to hurt. The pain of the already-healed wound breaks out unexpectedly like this. A long time ago, mother said that wounds will not hurt once they heal. But that is a lie. The wound made by that knife is still hurting me even after the wound has healed.

... But mother, I like this pain. For me who has never felt that I was alive, there is nothing else that makes me feel more alive than this sensation. This remaining sense of pain is not an illusion.

"I have to look for him quickly."

I murmur under my ragged breath. I have to get my revenge. I have to kill the boy that got away. It is irritating, but if I don't do so, people will find out that I am a murderer. I don't want that since I finally have obtained the sense of pain. I want to keep on feeling the pleasure of being alive. I take this body, that hurts every time I move it, and start to walk toward their hangout place. I cry at the remaining sense of pain in my stomach. But right now, even that discomfort is lovely.

/3

After parting with Azaka, I return to my place. When night comes, I go out into town. There have been five people killed so far. Four of them were in that basement bar two days ago. According to Touko, another was at a construction site yesterday night. Aside from the four killed two days ago, I do not see any relation with the one killed last night; but I cannot say it is a total stranger. Mikiya once said those that hang around at night have many connections. Maybe there is a high probability that the four, and the one killed last night are connected.

"That girl..."

I suddenly recall the girl that was with Azaka. That aura of death creeping out of her like capillaries. Since I am not used to my eyes yet, I saw it without any prior preparation. ... That was abnormal. It might be more abnormal than me. But that girl was normal. She smelled of blood, and she had eyes like mine that made her seem unaware of which boundary she was standing on. She must surely be my prey, but I still cannot be confident in myself. That girl has no cause. She has no reason to kill for pleasure like I do, no darkness that takes pleasure in murder.

Take pleasure in murder... What would Kokutou Mikiya think if he were to hear that? Would he scold me, telling me that murder is bad?

"Idiot."

I do not really know whether that word is directed at him or me. Kokutou Mikiya said I have not changed from before. I guess I am no different from before I went into that coma. Then, did I always take walks at night? ... Was I always this abnormal person, searching for someone to kill?

"....."

No, that's wrong. Shiki did not have such taste. She did, but it was not prioritized. Then this is SHIKI's sensibility. That of the man, Ryougi SHIKI - the yin; inside the woman, Ryougi Shiki - the yang. I dwell on my conclusion. I used to have him inside of me, but he is not there anymore. Not being there must mean that he is dead. Then..... this desire to kill can only be mine. As Touko said, this job is just for me; because I am certainly happy about being able to kill someone.

..... It's almost midnight. I take the train and arrive at a station I rarely visit. From this always-wakeful, noisy town, I can see a big port in the distance.

After I part with Azaka, I change my destination. I do not know where the last one would run to, but I think there is a way to search for him. The only ones directly involved with me were the four that I killed and the one that escaped, but I was taken to many places by them. If I go there and ask where the last one went, I should be able to find where he escaped to. Since they cannot trust the police or the school, the only ones they can depend on should be their kind. I hold my burning stomach as I walk through the night town. I had some hesitations about going into indecent places, but they are now trivial to me as I am tormented by the pain and my memories of being violated.

At the third place I visit, I meet a guy that says he is a friend of Minato Keita. He is working at a big building converted into a karaoke club and gives me an

unpleasant smile as he agrees to talk with me for a while. He sneaks out of his work and starts to walk, telling me we should go to a quiet place to talk. ... From the long experience I had, I can tell this man is taking me to their hangout place. These people can sniff out the weak. This person with the good, false smile must have seen through me as an easy victim to violate. ... He probably knows I was violated by Minato Keita's group too. That is why he takes me without any concern. Even though I know that, I still did not refuse to follow him. This man that is a few years older than me heads to a quieter area. I hold my stomach as it starts to hurt even more, and I prepare myself.

..... The time is almost midnight. I walk with this man as I curse the repeated violations in my head. From this always-wakeful, noisy town, I can see a big port in the distance.

The man can feel his good fortune. He knows from Keita's boasting that his group was playing around with this

girl from an all-girls school. It was Keita's habit to do as he wanted to that girl and then brag about it; but this man has nothing to do with it. He does not have any strong connections with Keita's group, and they are from different areas. That's why he always listened to Keita's story without concern. But for that girl to actually come to him!

You have to take what is given to you. The man decides to get out of work and take Fujino somewhere. ... It's not that the man is hungry for sex. It's not an unusual event for people like him to rape a girl with four or five other guys. There is a reason why this man does not call for his friends. It is because Fujino is the daughter of Asagami Construction's president. He should be able to get lots of money if he violates her and threatens to make the matter public. The group Keita is in is rather stupid when it comes to such matters. Maybe because their leader is not that smart. Or is it that they did not need money because they were smart? Well, it does not matter. Either way, the man is happy right now. He does not contact his friends because he thinks that he will get the largest payout if he does not share it.

Asagami Fujino, the girl who came to ask about Minato Keita, is following him silently. It would be bad

to take her to the usual hangout place. The man heads to the warehouse area of the port. Since it's almost midnight, the warehouse area is empty. As all warehouses are made the same way and arranged the same way, it seems like a giant factory. There aren't many streetlights and nobody should come if he were to go in between the warehouses. The only things that will be irritating will be the sound of waves, and the lights from Broad Bridge currently under construction on the other side of the water. Bringing Fujino into this darkness, the man finally opens his mouth.

"This should be fine. So, what did you want to ask about?"

The man decides to answer her question first. It is his intuition that it's not smart to attack from the start.

"Yes, would you happen to know where Keita-san is?"

Fujino is looking down while holding her stomach. Her cleanly-cut hair hangs down in front of her, and the man cannot see her face.

"I haven't seen him lately. He doesn't even have his own place so he's been going around people's places. You won't be able to contact him either, 'cause he doesn't have a cell phone."

"No..... I can contact him."

"Huh?"

This girl's words are strange. She can contact him but doesn't know where he is? Has this girl gone crazy from being raped so much? Well, if that's the case, it should make things easier, but it's also true that the man is somewhat disappointed. He calms down again.

"All right. If you can contact him, then just ask where he is."

"Well..... Keita-san does not want to tell me where he is hiding. That is why I am going around asking his friends. Please answer me... I do not care if you know or do not know."

"Whoa, wait a sec. What do you mean he's hiding? Did he get into some deep shit?"

The man gets irritated by the girl's strange words. He's hiding... does that mean that the cops know about them raping Fujino? No, if that was the case, she wouldn't come herself. The man thinks, but cannot come up with an answer, because... ... Because he has not seen the news

.

"Well, who cares. But what do you mean you don't care if I know or not? Was that your intention to begin with? Keita's not who you're after, but you came to find a new man or something?!"

The man laughs from his heart this time - "I really am in luck, I should be able to get the money without even making any threats." And besides, Asagami Fujino is a beautiful girl that he would not be able to easily obtain otherwise. A prize of money and beauty. What else can you call this but luck?

"Sorry, I should have taken you to my place from the start, then. Or do you like this kinda place better, perhaps?"

The girl in the black uniform nods.

"But before that, please tell me if you know where Keita-san is."

"Hey, dumbass, you can quit your excuse for coming here. First of all, I wouldn't know where he would go."

The girl looks up with a satisfied expression. The eyes looking at the man are abnormal. There is no emotion in those amber eyes that glow, and spiral.

..... It is not normal....

".....?"

The man, oblivious to those eyes, encounters something strange. His arm is moving on its own! His joint bends. His elbow stretches to about 90 degrees, and keeps bending... ... And finally, breaks.

"W-what.....!?"

A stupid scream. The fate of the man ends here. Certainly, he did have luck. Bad luck is luck indeed.

In a dark alley not even lit up by the moonlight, a tragedy raises its curtains.

".....!!!"

The scream only becomes a beast-like groan. The man's arms are no longer recognizable as arms. A puzzle ring... or a rubber band twisted around to make a model airplane fly. ... Either way, they cannot function as human arms anymore.

"H-h-help...!"

The man runs away from the girl, who is just standing in front of him. In that instant, his body is lifted off the ground and his right leg is torn away at the knee. Blood splashes as if emptying it from a full bucket. The blood that sprays along the wall seems like some sort of painting. Asagami Fujino keeps watching with her emotionless eyes.

"I-i-it's twi... twist-t-t-t-t-ed....!!!"

His words are incomprehensible. Fujino decides to ignore them.

..... She murmurs, "Bend."

That is the same word she has been saying all this time . Her friend has told her that a repeated word can become a curse. The man is on the ground, only moving his neck. Both his hands are twisted and his right leg is gone. The blood from his leg is soaking the ground. Fujino steps into it. A red carpet. Her shoes sink into the red liquid. The summer night is hot and the humid air sticks to her skin and becomes annoying. The blood in the air had a similar feeling.

"..... *Sigh*"

As she looks down at the man squirming like a green caterpillar, Fujino sighs. She hates herself for doing such a thing; but she also thinks this is what she intended to do from the start. She knew from the way he acted that this man did not know what happened in that basement bar. But he would find out in time. Then, he would grow suspicious of Fujino for searching Keita. So this is something that cannot be helped. This man intended to do that from the start. It is indirect, but this is part of Asagami Fujino's revenge. A revenge to those who violated her.

But her ability to violate far surpasses their ability to violate.

"I am sorry.... but I have to do this."

The man's remaining left leg is ripped away, causing the last of the life remaining in him to be cut off as well. Fujino looks down at the convulsing body. Right now she knows how the man feels. Until now, she did not know. She could not understand people's reaction to pain. But now that she knows pain, she can strongly sympathize with this man. That makes her happy. To be alive means to be hurt.

"And finally... I can be normal."

My pain, others' pain. I am the one who made him this way. I am the one that gave him these wounds. It means Asagami Fujino is superior. This is what it means to be alive, having this ugly self that cannot feel the pleasure of life unless committing such atrocities.

"..... Mother. Am I so ugly that I have to go this far?"

The thing in her stomach becomes unbearable. Her heart starts to beat rapidly. A chill runs up her spine...

"I do not want to kill people..."

"You're wrong."

Fujino turns around to the sudden voice. At the entrance of the alley between the warehouses, a girl in a kimono stands, with the port reflecting the quiet moonlight behind her...

... Ryougi Shiki is there...

"Shiki..... san?"

"Asagami Fujino... I see, you must have a connection with the Asagami God."

With a light footstep, Shiki takes a step forward. Shiki narrows her eyes at the smell of blood. Not in detest, but in happiness.

"Since when...."

Fujino stops her question. The answer is obvious.

"All this time. I followed you since you brought that piece of meat out here."

Fujino feels a chill at her cold voice. Shiki has seen it all . She saw it, but she still came out. She saw it, but did not

stop it. She knew this was going to happen, but just watched...

..... This person is abnormal.....

"Please do not say "piece of meat". This is a person. This is a human corpse."

Fujino argues so in spite of what she is thinking about. She feels that Shiki is saying too much to call that man a piece of meat. Shiki nods.

"Yeah, a human is still a human even when it's dead. It doesn't become a piece of meat just by dying. But that's not a human death, is it? Humans don't die that way."

Shiki takes another step forward.

"A human who did not end his life like a human is not human anymore. Even if the people you've killed are left with their head intact or their body unwounded, you can't think of it as being normal. Those removed from the boundary are deprived of all their meaning. That's why that thing is just a piece of meat."

Suddenly, Fujino feels repulsion towards this person. Shiki is saying that she and the corpse are out of the

ordinary, just like Ryougi Shiki, who is watching this tragedy right now without a change of expression.

"..... No. I am sane. I am not like you!"

Fujino screams out for no reason. Shiki laughs, like it is truly funny.

"We are alike, Asagami."

"Don't be ridiculous."

Fujino stares at Shiki. The vision in her eyes starts to distort. ... The "power" she had as a child comes into effect.

But the power suddenly fades away.

".....!?"

But the surprise is for both Shiki and Fujino. Asagami Fujino is surprised at her disappeared power. Ryougi Shiki is surprised at the suddenly-changed Asagami Fujino.

"Again...? What the hell is up with you?"

Shiki gets angry. She scratches her head like everything is ruined.

"I would have killed you if you stayed that way. You were like that too at the cafe. ... Fine. You let me down. I don't care about you now."

Saying that, Shiki turns and walks away. The sound of her footsteps gets farther away.

"Go home. If you do so, we shouldn't see each other again."

Then her figure disappears. Fujino stands still in the pool of blood.

..... I'm back to my previous self. I feel nothing again.

Fujino looks down at the man once more. There is no remnant of the feeling that was in her before. Only the sense of guilt enters her brain. What remains are the words Shiki left. Those words saying that Fujino and Shiki are both alike, both killers.

"No..... I am not like you."

Fujino murmurs as if crying. Truthfully, Fujino hates murder. She starts to tremble at the thought that she would have to continue such an act in order to find Minato Keita. Because killing people would be unforgivable. Those are her true emotions.

... The pool of blood reflecting her face shows her mouth forming a smile...

Sense of Pain / Stay Behind

3

In the early morning on July 23, I finally get to Minato Keita's place. From the information from his friends, his average radius of action, and his way of thinking, I was finally able to narrow down his hiding place after a whole day. In one of the mansions located far from the residential district... he is trespassing and staying in a room on the sixth floor. I ring the doorbell and call out in a semi-loud voice.

"Keita-kun. I came to help you on request from your Senpai. I'm coming in."

The door is not locked so I enter quietly. There is no light on inside the room and it's dark, even though it is morning. I walk through the wooden hallway and reach the living room. From the empty living room, you can see the kitchen and the bedroom.

"You're in the back, right? I'm coming in."

There is another room beside the bedroom. I open the door and find that it's pitch black inside, as all of the

curtains are drawn. A small scream comes out when I open the door. ... Like I thought, there's nothing in the room. A room without furniture is just like a box, there is no sign of life. In this room is a boy who looks to be about 16, trash from food, and a cell phone.

"You are Minato Keita-kun, right? It's unhealthy for you to stay in here. And it's wrong to use this room even when nobody is using it. This could be treated as burglary, you know?"

When I enter the room, Keita backs up against the wall His face is terribly thin and worn-out. It's only been three days since that incident but his cheeks are hollow and his eyes are red. It's obvious he has not slept. I heard that he was doing drugs, but that was wrong. He is going insane without the help of drugs. ... He just doesn't want to face reality after seeing such a tragic scene. He is barely maintaining his sanity by staying in this dark room. It's a really dangerous way for him to defend himself, but it might be useful at least for a few days. I let out a sigh of relief in my head since I made it in time.

"..... Who are you?"

There is still a bit of sensibility left in his voice. I stop. He is still confused after facing such a tragedy. He might be scared of the killer, so who knows what he would do if I were to get closer. Doubt will make him think I am his enemy. But... it should be different if we can talk. If we talk, his intelligence should return. I decide to stand and talk instead of trying to calm him down from close by.

"Who are you?"

I raise both my hands at his question.

"I'm a friend of Gakuto. I am a Senpai too. I'm Kokuto Mikiya, do you remember me?"

"Kokuto..... Senpai?"

I must have been an unexpected visitor for him. He stands dumbfounded for a second and then starts to cry.

"Senpai. Why would you come for me?"

"I came to protect you since Gakuto came and asked me. We're worried that you're in some kind of trouble."

I ask him if I can come closer Keita shakes his head violently.

"I'm not going out of here. I'll be killed if I do."

"You'll be killed if you stay in here too."

Keita's eyes widen. He glares at me with enmity. I take a cigarette out and light it. ... I don't smoke but it's a useful gesture to make you seem relaxed and help the other person calm down.

"I heard about it. You know the killer, right Keita-kun?"

I ask him while exhaling smoke, but he still stays quiet

"Then I'll just talk to myself for a while. On the night of the 20th, you guys were at your hangout place, the Shinkirou Bar. It was raining that night. I also happened to be out drinking that night, but I guess that doesn't matter. I've heard a lot of stories since Gakuto asked me to look for you. I think I know what you guys were doing on the night of the incident. I don't think the cops know about it yet. Those people prefer not to help the cops."

I shrug saying it's troublesome. Keita is showing a different kind of fear now. It's not fear of what is going to happen, but fear of his doings being found out.

"On the night of the incident, there was one other person beside you guys. The high school girl you guys were threatening. I don't know her name but someone saw her going down to the bar. That girl has not showed up at the police station, or anywhere for that matter, since that incident. But it's not like her corpse was found like the other four. Do you know what happened to her?"

"I don't know... I don't know such a person."

"Then that would make you the killer. I'll go call the police."

"Wait, I didn't do that...! There's no way I could do such a thing..."

"Yeah, I feel the same way. So the girl was really there?"
"

After a brief silence, Keita nods.

"But that brings another question. That incident is not something a girl can accomplish by herself. Were you guys drugged?"

The boy shakes his head. Not to the question that the girl is the killer, but to the question of whether they were insane or not.

"It's impossible for five guys to be taken out by just one girl."

"But that's the truth...! I thought she was weird from the start, but she was mad! Monster... she was a monster!"

He starts to tremble and covers his face with his hands. I guess he is recalling the incident.

"She was just standing there and everyone started to twist up. I heard their bones breaking and I didn't know what the hell was going on. ... After she killed two of us, I knew Fujino wasn't normal; I knew that I'd be killed if I stayed there!"

Keita's words are certainly abnormal. He is saying that the girl - the one called Fujino - tore off everyone's limbs

just by standing there and staring at them. I don't know why he thinks so, but I guess Keita felt it immediately ... the difference between the one doing the killing and the ones getting killed. But... she bends things just by looking at them? I can't quite believe it but I take the fact in. What can I deny after knowing Shiki, the one with killer eyes, and Touko-san, the magus? Well, leaving that aside, there's one word that caught my attention.

"All right. I'll believe that this Fujino girl did it."

"..... Huh?"

Keita raises his head in surprise.

"But... that's a lie. No one would believe such a story! Please, tell me you're lying!"

"Then let's just assume it's a trick, or should I say, "hypnosis" or something? Either way, don't think too hard about it. Don't try to accept what you really don't understand. But... what do you mean she was weird from the start?"

It seems Keita is regaining his sanity. The tension in him starts to fade away.

"It's just she's... weird. It seems like she's acting out everything, like her reactions are always late. She won't change her expression even when Leader threatens her. She won't change even when she's drugged and she won't even show pain when being punched."

"..... I see."

I knew they were violating Fujino but when he comes out and says that, I'm speechless. That girl called Fujino was violated by them for half a year and killed them as revenge. Is there justice in that, or do "what's just" and "what's lawful" contradict each other in this situation? Well, I don't want to think about it right now.

"So she looked great, but it wasn't fun doing her. It felt like doing a doll. Oh yeah, but that time was different. It's recent but there was this messed up guy in our group. He found her fun because she wouldn't change her expression no matter how much he punched her, so he finally brought out a bat and smacked her across her back. He was like "WHACK!" and smacked away. She did make a painful face. I felt a bit relieved 'cause I knew she was feeling pain too. I remember it 'cause she was human that night."

"You, shut up for a while."

Keita shuts his mouth. I don't think I can keep my composure if I hear any more of this.

"I get the situation. I know someone in the police so we can go there. That's about the second safest place I know."
"

I approach him to make him stand up, but Keita jumps back.

"No, I won't go to the cops. Besides... I'll be killed if I go out. I'd rather stay here if I'm going to be torn to pieces!"

"Killed if you go out...?"

It's worded a bit strangely. It seems there's still one big misunderstanding between us. ... I can understand him saying that he'll be found if he goes out. But it's strange for him to skip that and say he's going to be killed. That's like he's being... watched. Then I finally realize what the cell phone by his feet means.

"..... You're getting calls from Asagami Fujino."

Keita starts to tremble once again at those words.

"Does she know of this place yet?"

The boy answers that he doesn't know.

"I had Leader's cell phone when I ran away. She called me after everyone was killed. She said she's going to look for me no matter what! So I have to hide!"

"Why do you still have that cell phone?"

I know the answer but I still ask.

"Because she says she's going to kill me if I get rid of it! She says I should hang on to it if I don't wanna die! She says she's gonna let me go as long as I have this!"

..... How callous... Her curse is so strong.

"But she still calls me every night. ... She's insane. She saw Shono two days ago, Kouhei yesterday... she said she killed them because they didn't know where I was. And she said kindly that it was good for me! She tells me I should go see her if I don't want my friends killed... no way I can do that!!!"

... What kind of fear would that be? The phone calls he receives every night are messages from the one trying to kill him.

... I could not find you today.

One of your friends died in your place.

Come see me if you don't want them killed. You don't have to come, but these murders will continue...

... and I will eventually find you...

"What should I do? I don't wanna die. I don't want to die like that! They were crying in pain! They were coughing up blood and their necks were twisted like nothing!"

"Let's get rid of that phone. Or there will be more victims."

"Don't you get it!? I'm saying I'll be killed if I do that!"

Two innocent people were killed because of that. Asagami Fujino had to commit two meaningless murders because of that.

"You'll be killed anyway if you stay like this."

I push my cigarette into the ground and start to walk towards him. I forcefully pull on his arm.

"Senpai, please don't do this. I can't do anything now. Please leave me alone... leave me alone..... no, really, I'm scared. I don't wanna be by myself anymore. Please help me...!"

I nod.

"I'll help you. I won't go to the cops. I'll take you to the safest place I know."

The only place that will be able to take him in will be Touko-san's place. Believing that is the best option, I leave the mansion with Keita.

4

I tell Touko-san about the situation, and have her protect Keita. She leaves the boy, who hasn't slept since

the night of the incident, on her sofa and comes back into the office where Shiki and I are waiting. Touko-san sits on her chair and Shiki is leaning up against the wall. I am sitting on the sofa directly in front of Touko-san. Finally calming down after Keita falls asleep, they both tell me that I am too good-natured. I take their words of criticism with a sullen face.

"I knew you guys were going to make fun of me like that."

"If you knew, you shouldn't have involved yourself in this mess. You're easily taken advantage of by those kinds of guys."

"It can't be helped. The situation was special."

Touko-san ponders my response. She is using offensive words, but she did agree to take Keita in for protection. Shiki, however, is against it. She might be really mad, as she is glaring at me wordlessly.

"Special, huh? I do admit this is an abnormal case, but what are you going to do now? Are you thinking about looking for her and persuading her?"

"..... That's what I was thinking. We can't have him here forever and Asagami Fujino might continue killing people. I think I can only go see her and talk to her."

"You idiot. That's why we say you're too good-natured ."

Shiki holds nothing back. She never does, but she is rather offensive today. She really is mad.

"You won't be able to talk to her, it's too late. She won't stop until she accomplishes her goal. No, I don't even know if she'll stop then. Her means and intention are reversed."

"Shiki, you sound like you know her."

"I know her, and I've met her too. She was there with Azaka yesterday."

I'm surprised. I wonder why Azaka would be with Asagami Fujino. They are totally unrelat--.... I guess not. I only heard that she is a high schooler, but it's a different story if she is from Reien Ladies Academy.

"You're pretty slow, Kokutou. You haven't investigated Asagami Fujino yet?"

"Hey now, I only heard her name for the first time two hours ago. My role was to protect Minato Keita, so I didn't have time to do anything like that."

... But I have a bad feeling about this. It's not that I'm worried that Azaka might be involved... it feels more like the impatience you feel when you are forced to think about something you've been avoiding.

"... Then is Asagami Fujino still going to school?"

"No, she hasn't been home or back at the dorms since the night of the incident. She's been skipping school too: she has completely disappeared. Azaka said she hasn't seen her since yesterday."

"Touko-san, when did you research this?"

"Just a while ago. I received a search request from her parents. I heard Azaka was with Asagami Fujino yesterday from Shiki but it seems Azaka didn't notice anything wrong with her friend."

What irony, if my promise with Azaka was a day later or if I had found Keita faster, yesterday's victim might not have been killed.

"So the protection of Minato Keita is not meaningless to us. If we cannot find her, we can use him as bait. It'll get rough from there so you and Keita should stay here."

With that, I finally understand... the reason why Shiki is here.

"Rough.....? What are you going to do with Asagami Fujino?"

"Depending on the circumstances, we'll probably have to resort to combat. First of all, even the client wishes it. He doesn't want his daughter reported as a killer. He told us to get rid of her before it all goes public."

"What? It's not like she's committing meaningless murders...! I think a discussion is possible."

"That's impossible. You haven't heard the whole truth. You don't know the final blow she took when she killed them. I made Keita confess when I put him to sleep. I

heard that his leader attacked Fujino on the last night with a knife. It seems she was stabbed. That's what triggered her revenge."

... Knife... so she was threatened with a knife even after being violated? So why would that be the reason she's beyond help?

"The problem is right there. She was stabbed in her stomach on the night of the 20th. Shiki saw her two days later. At that time, she had no wound... she was completely healed."

"Stabbed in the stomach....."

Hold on. Don't think anymore. My mind tries to stop me but fails. On the night of 20th, student of the Reien Academy, stabbed in the stomach.....

"I heard it from Keita, but she says on the phone that she cannot forget because the wound keeps on hurting. The wound that healed starts to hurt. Probably, whenever she has a flashback of the times when she was violated, the pain of being stabbed returns. The horrible memory brings back the terrible pain. I believe the pain is an illusion, but it must be real for her. This is no different than a fit. Every time Asagami Fujino has a

flashback of the pain that doesn't even exist, she kills. Who can be sure that won't happen while you're talking with her?"

But that means we can talk to her if she doesn't feel the pain. But before I can say so, Shiki speaks out.

"That's wrong, Touko. She really feels pain. It's still in her body."

"That can't be. Then, Shiki, is it your mistake that her wound is completely healed?"

"Her stab wound is healed. There's nothing like a piece of metal in her. Her pain really did appear and disappear. It's already too late when she's in pain, but when she's not, she's too boring. I told you that I came back 'cause she wasn't even worth killing."

"Well, she would be already dead if a fragment of metal were still inside her... but a wound that still hurts after it's healed, huh?"

Touko-san takes out a cigarette as if saying she doesn't understand. I too can only wonder at Shiki's words. It's normal to be in pain until the wound heals. But why would the pain of a wound that's already healed come

back from time to time? That's like having only the sense of pain remaining in your body.

"... Oh."

And it hits me. It's not an answer to her unknown symptoms, but I am able to understand why Keita called her weird.

"Kokutou, is that some new way of staying healthy by saying vowels out loud?"

... I don't think anyone would do such a thing, even if it existed.

"No, about Asagami Fujino being weird."

Touko-san raises her brow. Oh, I only told her the summary of the story, so I guess I haven't told her about this yet. I tell her about the strange condition of Fujino.

"Isn't something strange? It was in the conversation with Minato Keita, but it seems she was unaffected by anything they did to her. I thought she was a strong girl at first, but I was wrong. She isn't that resolute of a person."

"..... You sound like you know her, Mikiya."

Shiki glares at me. My instincts tell me to ignore her. ... I might be digging myself a hole if I didn't.

"It's possible... I don't know that much about it, but I think she might have something like Paresthesia, or pain insensitivity."

Pain insensitivity is just as it sounds, a disorder where one cannot feel any pain. It's a very rare condition, so you never encounter it, but if that happens to be the case, her strange symptoms might be possible.

"I see. Then that can explain some things, but there should be a reason. Even if she did get stabbed, if she is pain insensitive, there wouldn't be any pain to start out with. You also need to check if she was born with it and you also have to know if her nerves are dissociated. Well, assuming that she is pain insensitive, is there anything that might cause this insensitivity to malfunction, like hitting her back hard or taking lots of steroids?"

Hitting her back hard... it must be that.

"I don't know how hard, but I heard they hit her in the back with a bat."

I say this as unemotionally as possible. Touko-san just laughs.

"I see. As it's them, they probably took a full swing. Her backbone might have been broken. Even a small fracture is considered a broken bone. And she was still violated even after her backbone was broken, not knowing what that feeling is. Geez, that's the first pain she feels, huh? She must not have understood what her irritation was. Wow, I'm surprised you decided to protect Minato Keita."

Touko-san says so, grinning. She has this bad habit of cornering someone with her words. I guess she likes to attack people mentally, and it usually ends up being me. I usually fight back, but I cannot answer right now. ... I don't have the confidence to. All I could do is look down and reject her response.

"... So, Touko-san, are the backbone and pain insensitivity related somehow?"

"Yeah, your spine controls your nerves, right? When you have a problem with your sense of pain, you usually have something wrong in your spine. Do you know of Syringomyelia?"

... I would not know of such a technical medical term. Touko-san lowers her shoulders in disappointment when I shake my head.

"Syringomyelia is the most common case of pain insensitivity. Listen, Kokuto, there are two types of sense: *Superficial sensation* that lets you feel such things as pain, temperature and touch, and *deep sensation* that tells you of your body movements and general area. Normally, these two senses work at the same time. Do you know what it means to have no senses at all?"

"I can put it in words. You don't feel anything that you touch, and you don't taste anything that you eat, right?"

Touko-san nods with a smile.

"That's a natural response of a person with senses. You think they don't have senses but have a body, so they are like you. But that's wrong. To have no sense means that you cannot gain anything, Kokutou."

Cannot gain anything...? No way. They should still be able to hold things and talk to others. Then that would only mean that they cannot feel what they are touching. Why would that lead to not being able to gain anything? It's not like they don't have their body. I think it's better than someone missing a part of their body or something.

Then I realize. No body. Even when they touch, they cannot feel that they are touching. They just look at it and confirm that they are "touching". That is the same as reading a book. What's so different about it from reading a book or imagining a story? Even when they walk, they are only moving their body. They do not feel the ground, but only feel their feet moving. No, even that feeling is barely confirmed by looking at their own feet. To have no sense means not having a body. That would make them no different from ghosts. For them, all reality is what they see through their eyes. That's the same as not being able to touch anything even if they really can touch...!

"So that's pain insensitivity, huh?"

... That night, I met a girl who was uncertain about reality.

"That's right. Let's assume Asagami Fujino's pain insensitivity temporarily went away from being hit in her back. Then that would mean she knows what pain feels like. That sense she has never felt before must be her impulse for murder."

Would that girl, who found out what pain feels like, hate such a sensation? No, it would be impossible for her to think so. ... Since she is like a ghost, I can only imagine how happy she must have been when she felt the sensation of pain. She would not have understood the feeling of happiness either, though.

"... Maybe the pain insensitivity went away temporarily, and her experiencing pain might have caused her to figure out the emotion of hate. The feeling of pain she finally obtained triggered her revenge..."

... What irony.

"That's the question. Fujino said that she is taking revenge because her wound is hurting, but I have to wonder. To be more accurate, her pain makes her recall the violations done to her, which makes her want to take revenge. I think this is how it is but it just doesn't feel right. First of all, according to Shiki, she's back to pain

insensitivity, right? Then that would take away her reason for revenge. Her wound should not hurt, since it's healed."

"That's wrong, Touko-san. To have no feelings must mean she cannot experience sexual stimulation either, so she could not feel anything even when they raped her. To her, it only means that her body was raped. But... no, because of that, instead of her body hurting, her heart was taking the pain. I think her wounds are not on her body but rather in her soul. That's why the pain comes back with the memory, because her heart is in pain."

Touko-san does not answer. In her place, Shiki starts to laugh.

"That's impossible. There's no such thing as a soul . How can something that's not there hurt?"

I can't think of any comebacks to what she says. Surely , something sentimental, such as a soul, is not something you can prove to exist. When I am just standing there silently, Touko-san disagrees with Shiki.

"But people's hearts, their minds, are easily broken. I don't think you can conclude that it can't be hurt just because it has no form. In reality, some people die

because they are hurt mentally. No matter how poor of an illusion it is, as long as it is true for the person, the illusion can be called "pain".

That's a rather ambiguous answer for her. But now, I have someone on my side. Shiki gets angry.

"What, Touko, are you siding with Asagami Fujino too ? She's not like that."

"Yeah, I feel the same way with respect to that. I don't think Asagami Fujino would be that sentimental. She takes revenge because her heart hurts? I don't think so. Because, if you're pain insensitive, even your heart won't feel pain."

She instantly sides against me.

"Look, personality is medically defined as "a phenomenon by which a person reacts to outside force". A person's emotions... such things as "kindness" and "hate" cannot just come from within. They would not function unless something from outside stimulates them. That's why there is pain. To not have pain means this cannot happen. People with pain insensitivity lack

personality. They do not think like you or have tastes similar to us. They do not understand common sense. That's why talking with her is meaningless."

She casually tells me the conclusion of the suggestion of talking to her. Her indifference seems rather like a last warning and puts me on the edge.

"... Please don't say that when you haven't even met her."

I stand up from the sofa, not being able to take it any longer.

"That's all under the assumption that Asagami Fujino has been pain insensitive since she was born. This might not be the case."

"You're the one who said she might be pain insensitive ."

She says so coldly. ... This person really does not care about others. How can she be so cold to Asagami Fujino when she's a woman? Or is it that she can be this cold *because* she is a woman?

"Well, I do have things that I'm concerned about too. Asagami Fujino might be just a victim. The question is which was first."

... What does she mean by "which was first"? Touko-san starts to ponder and does not explain anymore.

"What do you think, Shiki?"

I ask her without turning around. Shiki answers exactly as I expected.

"Same as Touko. But I can't allow Asagami Fujino to continue, regardless of what Touko thinks. I feel sick just from thinking that she might commit another murder."

"Hate towards those similar to you, huh? It does seem true that your kind doesn't like to form groups."

Touko-san hears Shiki's words. I know why Shiki said so. ... When will Shiki realize herself that she really does not like murder? Asagami Fujino and Ryougi Shiki, I do think the two are alike. Since they are similar, they

cannot ignore the crucial difference. If the two did end up in combat... would Shiki realize her true feelings? No, I can't let them fight.

"..... I understand. I'll look into her information my way. Can I see any data on her if you have any?"

Touko-san hands it to me. Shiki looks away telling me to do as I please. Looking at the information, Asagami Fujino lived in Nagano until elementary school. Her surname there was not Asagami as in "Shallow Top" but Asagami as in "Shallow God". Her father right now is not her real father, meaning that she followed her mother when she remarried. I guess this would be the place to start my investigation.

"I have to travel quite a long way. I may not come back today or tomorrow. Oh, and Touko-san, is there really any such thing as supernatural power?"

"You don't believe what Minato Keita said? Asagami Fujino surely has some sort of power to that effect. That, the term "supernatural power", is too broad, so it's not really that accurate. If you want to know about it, I can introduce you to a specialist."

Saying that, Touko-san writes the address of this supernatural power specialist on the back of her business card.

"Wait, you don't know much about it?"

"Of course not. Magic is a study. How can we associate ourselves with something inherent without history or theory violating the rule? Those kinds of powers only given to the chosen ones are what I hate the most."

She really must hate it, as she sounds like she has her glasses on. I take her business card and then speak to Shiki.

"Shiki, I'm going, but make sure you don't push yourself."

"You're the one pushing yourself. I guess it really is true that stupidity can't be fixed."

Shiki uses these offensive words, but then nods, saying she'll try. I leave the office with relief. It's all right, I've never died, but I was almost killed once. I haven't told

her that the one who almost killed me was Shiki herself. She forgot about that incident after she recovered from her coma - it's fine if she does not remember.

I will probably never tell her about it.

/4

July 24th. It has been one day since Kokutou Mikiya went to investigate Asagami Fujino. Not much has happened in this time. The only significant events are a big hurricane coming later tonight up to tomorrow morning and a 17 year old driving without a license dying in a collision. At least, that's all that happened publicly. Ryougi Shiki is staring aimlessly outside from Aozaki Touko's office. The summer sky is so huge that one instantly gets weary of looking at it. In the cloudless sky lies the shining sun. It seems like a bad dream that this clear sky is going to be covered by storm clouds later tonight.

Clang! Clang!

The noise echoes. There is a metal factory beside this office. Since Shiki is beside the window, the noise assaults her ears endlessly. Shiki looks at Touko, who is making a phone call. She's wearing her glasses.

"Yes, that is right. About that accident. ... I see, so he was indeed dead before the collision. Is his cause of death strangulation? That isn't wrong. If the neck has been twisted, it is strangulation. It does not matter how

strongly it was done. How have you people treated this, as an accident? A collision, I see... That would seem right. There was only the victim in the car. No detective can solve the mystery of a moving sealed room. No, that's all the information I wanted. Thank you very much. I will repay you for this somehow, Officer Akimi."

Touko sounds very formal and kind. It is so different from her usual tone, which causes people to shiver when they hear it. After hanging up the phone, Touko adjusts her glasses, to sit in front of those emotionless eyes.

"Shiki, the 7th victim appeared. This is more than the killer two years ago."

Shiki walks away from the window, slightly upset. She wanted to see the sky be taken over by dark clouds.

"I told you. It has to be a meaningless murder this time ."

"It seems so. Minato Keita doesn't know this Takagi Shouichi guy who died in the accident. This murder has nothing to do with her revenge."

Shiki, who is wearing a white kimono, grits her teeth in anger. She puts on a red leather jacket.

"I see. Then I can't wait any longer. Touko, do you know where she is?"

"Nope. I can guess a few places where she might be hiding. If you're going to look for her, you'll just have to go look at all those places."

Touko takes out a few cards from her desk and throws them at Shiki, who grabs them swiftly.

"... These are... Asagami group's personal identification cards? Who is this Araya Souren guy?"

All three cards are entrance cards to the construction areas which the Asagami construction group is involved in. It must be a magnetic lock since there is a magnetic stripe on each card.

"That alias is the name of one of my acquaintances. I couldn't think of a random name. I used it when I had someone make these ID cards. Well, that doesn't matter. Asagami Fujino should be hiding in one of those places. It'll be troublesome, so finish this off before Kokutou gets back."

Shiki glares at Touko. Her usually hollow eyes sharpen. She directs a silent complaint to Touko but turns around without saying anything. She has the same opinion as Touko. Shiki does not hurry out, but leaves with her usual graceful steps. Now that she's alone, Touko looks outside the window.

"Looks like Kokutou didn't make it. Well, will a storm come first or will a *storm* come first? Shiki by herself might not make it out alive, Ryougi."

The magus murmurs to no one.

Right after noon, the weather starts to change. The blue sky is now already covered with gray clouds. The wind is getting stronger too. Talk of a coming storm is exchanged between those walking around.

"Guh....."

I keep walking, holding my burning stomach. I didn't know about the storm. Probably because I was so caught up looking for someone. The town is rowdy but there are fewer and fewer people out on the streets. It looks like I won't be able to do it tonight. I think I should go back for today.

After many hours, I finally reach the port on foot. The sky is already dark even though it's still seven in the summertime. A storm can even mess up the usual times of seasons. I move my body, whose reactions are beginning to lag more and more as time goes on, and reach the entrance of the bridge. This bridge is the bridge my father is working hardest on. A big bridge that connects this port and the port on the other side. The bridge is a four-laned road with many pathways beneath it. The underground is like a shopping mall. Even though it is floating on the ocean, I call it "underground" because it's under the bridge. There are guards on the upper part of the bridge, so I can't get in there; but the entrance to the underground mall is unmanned and I can go inside if I have a card. I take out one of the cards that I took from my house and open the door.

... It's dark inside. Even though most of the interior design work is finished, there isn't any electricity running yet. The empty mall seems like a station about to close up for the day. Many different stores straddle the sides of the corridors that seem to stretch on forever. I walk for about 500 meters and end up in a parking lot. This place is still under construction and is really messy. The walls are unfinished and the bags to keep out the rain are making noise in the wind. It's almost eight o'clock. The wind is strong. I want to plug my ears against the sound of the wind and the crashing of the waves. The sound of rain striking the walls is fiercer than the machine guns I see in movies.

"Rain....."

It was raining on that day too. After my first murder, I washed myself off in the rain. After that, I was able to meet that person. That person who I met only once in middle school and with whom I only talked for the briefest of moments.

... Yes, I remember. It was a time when the sun was setting. After an event at school, a Senpai from a different school talked to me, who was still on the field. I could

not move because I had sprained my ankle. Since I am pain insensitive, I actually could move and even if I shouldn't move, it had no effect on me mentally. But my swollen ankle was telling me that it would get worse if I moved any more. All I could do was watch the sunset without feeling anything. At that time, I did not call for help. I did not want to call for help. If I did, everyone would tell me... "You endured quite a bit of pain." "Does it hurt?" "Doesn't it hurt?" "Don't you think it hurts?" I did not want that. That is why I was sitting down with a normal expression. I was being a bit stubborn not to let anyone notice. My mother, father, teacher, friends... nobody noticed. I had to let everyone think that Fujino was normal. At that time, somebody tapped me on my shoulder. I did not feel it but I heard a sound by my ear. When I turned around, that person was standing there. He looked kind, without knowing what I was thinking. I think my first impression of him was that I did not like him.

"Does it hurt?"

That person greeted me with unbelievable words. How did he know about the wound that nobody should know about? I shook my head. I was being stubborn not to admit it. He looked at the name tag on my gym

uniform and said my name. He then felt my sore ankle and made a sour face. I knew he was going to say something I would not like, so I closed my eyes. I did not want to hear insensitive words from people with normal senses such as "does it hurt?" or "is the pain bad?"; but he said something completely different.

"You're stupid. Look, pain is not something you should bear. Pain is something you have to announce, Fujino-chan."

...That is what Senpai told me when I was in middle school. After that, Senpai carried me to the nurse's office and that was that. It was like a vague dream. Come to think of it, Asagami Fujino might have fallen in love with him at that time. That smile that worried about the suffering that nobody else noticed.....

Throb.

My stomach aches, rousing me from my dream. There is no way I can be dreaming when I'm covered in people's blood. But... the rain might wash away my impurity. I want to go up to the bridge. The storm is already here. It should be like a spilled bucket, out there on the bridge. I start to get excited. I drag my body,

which now feels constant pain, and go up the slope in the parking lot.

Asagami Fujino goes up onto the bridge. To be soaked in the familiar summer rain.

The big bridge has turned into a shallow lake. The four-lanes of asphalt are covered with rain water and it goes up to one's ankles. The smashing rain comes down at an angle and the wind is raging as if to knock the street lamps down. The sky is dark. The light of the port is far away and unreachable like watching the moon from the ground. Asagami Fujino comes out into this storm. The black uniform blends into the night. She walks soaked in rain, breathing out from her purple lips. When she reaches a street lamp, she meets Death.

"I finally found you, Asagami." In the sea of the storm, Ryoudgi Shiki stands dressed in a white kimono. The red leather jacket repels the rain. She is also soaked.

She looks like a ghost.

Shiki and Fujino both stand under the street lamp. There are about ten meters of ground between them. She finds it strange that they can see each other and hear each other through the driving rain, and the raging wind.

"Ryougi..... Shiki."

"You should have just gone back home like I told you. You're a beast that knows only the taste of blood. You enjoy murder."

"..... That is you. I do not enjoy murder."

Fujino, still breathing hard, stares at Shiki.

Hostility. Killing intent.

Fujino quietly covers her face with her left hand. Her eyes glare from between her fingers. As if to answer, Shiki raises a knife with her right hand. This is their third meeting. Shiki laughs, thinking of the idiom that "third time's the charm". This Asagami Fujino is more than sufficient to be her target.

"... I feel it. Yes, we are alike. Yeah..... I can kill you as you are now."

With those words, the two's restraints are completely removed.

/5

Shiki starts to run. Her speed is incredible, despite the pooling water and violent wind. It should not take more than three seconds to reduce the distance between them from ten meters to zero. Enough time to bring Fujino's frail body to the ground and stab her in her heart. But even that speed cannot match the speed of sight. Shiki has to close in on her target while Fujino only has to look at her target. For the two, that difference of three seconds is too long.

"....."

Fujino's eyes glimmer. The left eye for a rotation to the left. The right eye for a rotation to the right. Taking Shiki's head and left leg as the fulcrums, she twists. A strange sensation occurs instantaneously. The moment Shiki feels the invisible power upon her, she jumps explosively to one side. But the power on Shiki does not weaken. Fujino's power is not a projectile weapon. Even if one gets away from one round, it is impossible to get completely away from it whilst in her vision.

..... Damn.....!!

Shiki realizes Fujino's power is stronger than she thought. She runs. As if to escape from her vision, Shiki runs in a circle around Fujino.

"Do you think you can get away-"

Fujino murmurs, but then is astonished. Shiki did get away! Unbelievably, Shiki has jumped off the bridge down to the ocean. The sound of a window being broken is heard. What athletic ability... Shiki went off the bridge and into the parking lot right underneath it.

"What a ridiculous person you are."

Shiki did get away. But Fujino saw Shiki's left arm until the end. She did see Shiki's leather jacket twist. Shiki's left arm cannot be used anymore. Fujino realizes...

"I am..... stronger."

The pain in her stomach gets worse by the second. Withstanding the pain, Fujino makes her way down. She has to settle her match with Ryougi Shiki now.

Darkness engulfs the parking lot. Visibility is bad, making it hard to walk. It feels like being in a miniature town. The metal poles and the stacks of materials are

arranged like buildings. A few minutes after following Shiki down here, Fujino regrets choosing this place as the battleground. Her ability has to have the target in her vision to set the fulcrum of the twist. Even if Fujino knows that Shiki is hiding behind a metal pole, if she cannot see Shiki, then only the pole can be twisted. In that slight instant on top of the bridge, Shiki understood Fujino's power. That is why she ran away, here, the place where she has a chance of winning. ...Fujino realizes how inferior she is at fighting. But still..... She is stronger in terms of power. If she cannot see, she'll just have to destroy everything blocking her view. Fujino takes every metallic pole that might get in her way and bends them. As she twists each one, the pain in her stomach gets worse and the shaking in the parking lot gets harder.

"You really are ridiculous."

Shiki's voice echoes through the darkness. Fujino turns in the direction of the sound. The stack of materials Shiki is hiding behind is instantly smashed. At that instant... a white figure streaks out of the wreckage

"... There!!"

Fujino's eyes get a hold on Shiki. The girl in the white kimono and the red leather jacket runs toward Fujino, holding her left arm out.

".....!!"

Fujino hesitates a bit and then *bends*. With a cracking sound, Shiki's left arm breaks. Her neck is next; but when Fujino looks... Shiki is already within range. The path that the knife takes is like a flash of light. A bright swing that leaves a lingering trace in the darkness. The knife that strikes without hesitation, however, does not hit Fujino. She ducks, avoiding the swing that was aimed at her neck... no, it was just an accident. Asagami Fujino only looked away because she was scared of Shiki, who was running towards her with a broken arm.

"Damn..."

Shiki readies her knife again. Fujino frantically stares at Shiki's body.

"... Go away...!"

Shiki's movement is faster than Fujino's scream. Shiki runs unhesitatingly into the darkness. One should be

surprised not at her athletic ability, but at her quick thinking in choosing to escape.

"..... What a person....."

Fujino murmurs. Her rough breathing is not from the pain in her stomach. Fujino carefully checks the darkness around her. She does not know when Shiki will jump out of it again. Fujino feels her neck. There is a slight scratch from the last attack. A wound of about 4mm that isn't bleeding. ... It is not bleeding, but her breathing is hard.

"Why does she not stop, even when her arm is broken..
..?"

Fujino says so aloud, unable to contain the fear in that question. She cannot forget that moment. Those eyes of Shiki, who still came at her after having her arm broken. Shiki was having fun. That person is enjoying this situation where even I, the one with the advantage, am overwhelmed with tension. Maybe... for Ryougi Shiki, having her arm broken is not pain, but happiness. Fujino has not enjoyed murder so far. She does not want to kill. But that person is different. That person must like murder. The more extreme the situation is, the happier she becomes. Fujino thinks... if Ryougi Shiki is a person

that lacks any sense of feeling towards life itself, what will she do to substitute for that? For Fujino, it was murder. When she sees other humans die, she gets this indescribable feeling... Since Fujino found out what pain feels like, she is able to sympathize with others in pain. The reality that she is the one in control of others makes her feel that she really does exist. A "ruthless murder" is Fujino's substitute. She does not know it herself, but Fujino takes pleasure in murder. Then what is Ryoudgi Shiki's substitute.....?

"That was bad"

Hiding behind a stack of debris, Shiki murmurs to herself. The arm had no power when it was twisted on the bridge. Since it was useless, she decided to use it as a shield and rely on one decisive strike; but the plan failed because of the fact that Fujino was more cowardly than Shiki thought she would be. Shiki takes off her jacket and cuts away the sleeve. She wraps the cloth around her left upper arm to staunch the bleeding. A crude treatment.

There's no feeling in the arm that was twisted. It will probably never move. Shiki feels a chill at that fact.

"You're great, Asagami. You're the best...!"

She is losing blood quickly. She feels her consciousness slipping away.

...I'm hot-blooded anyway. If I lose some, it will just make me think more clearly...

Shiki concentrates. Asagami Fujino is a strong enemy that might be the best she'll ever meet. One mistake could cost her her life. That is pleasant, that makes Shiki feel that she is alive. For Shiki, normally bound by her past, only this moment is real. This sensation that she is able to feel only when putting her life in danger. That small life of hers that she can declare as her own. Kill or be killed. Since even her normal life is vague, Shiki can feel life only by such primal methods as this. If Asagami Fujino seeks pleasure in murder... Ryougi Shiki seeks the sensation of life by relating with murder. Fujino fears this situation.... and Shiki wishes for this situation. That is the difference between the hunter and the hunted. The difference between the two is definite now.

... Fujino's breathing echoes in the air. ... Roughly, strongly, painfully, as if in fear...

She is breathing hard, like Shiki, even though she has not been hurt yet. In the dark, they breathe in unison. Are their heartbeats, minds, and even their lives the same? The bridge swinging in the storm feels like a crib. Shiki, for the first time, feels some affection toward Fujino. So much that she feels she must take Fujino's life with her own hands.

"I know it's useless though....."

Shiki murmurs. She knew from the time she saw her at the cafe. She knows that the inside of Asagami Fujino is on the verge of breaking down. It's meaningless to finish off Fujino right now. But, that's life. Shiki thinks some things should come out of meaningless actions. She remembers Touko saying that humans are creatures that do meaningless things. Shiki feels the same way now. Exactly like this bridge. People decry one uselessness as stupidity while praising another uselessness as art. Where does the boundary lie? Boundaries are uncertain. It is the person that establishes them, but it's always external influences that determine them. Then there is no

such thing as a boundary to begin with. The world is full of empty boundaries. That is why there are no walls in society to separate the abnormal from the normal.

... The ones to make the wall are us. Like me wanting to get away from the world. Like the way Mikiya thinks I'm not abnormal. ... Like the way Asagami Fujino is running away to death...

In that sense, Shiki and Fujino are alike. They are similar. In this small space, two of the same kind are not needed.

"Let's go. I can see the trick to your magic show now."

After shaking her head clear of the effect of the blood loss, Shiki gets up. She grips her knife tightly in her right hand. If Fujino does not lay her own boundary... then she will just have to eliminate her.

Shiki slowly appears. Fujino cannot believe her eyes. Shiki comes out directly in front of her, and a long distance away, too. Fujino does not notice but her fever is over 39 degrees now. She does not realize that the pain in her stomach is from a "certain condition".

"... I see. You must be abnormal."

Fujino can only think this. She looks at Shiki and *bends*. Her vision distorts. The fulcrums created on Shiki's head and leg each rotate in opposite directions and twist Shiki's body like a piece of carpet.

... It should have twisted her.

Shiki, whose left arm is bleeding, nullifies Fujino's "distortion" just by swinging the knife in her right hand. No..... she kills it.

"It's hard to see that without form, but you used your power too many times. Now I can finally see it. Your power is a spiral of red and green. It's really... beautiful."

Fujino does not understand what Shiki is saying. The only thing she realizes is that Shiki will surely kill her now. Fujino repeatedly prays.

Bend, bend, bend, bend!

As Fujino glares, Shiki swings her knife and eliminates the power. The pain in Fujino's stomach is about to go over its limit.

"Who..... are you?"

Shiki answers Fujino's fear with infinitely deep eyes.

"Everything in existence has an imperfection. Especially humans, but even in air, will, and time. It's natural to have an end if it has a beginning. My eyes can see the death of things. They're special, like yours."

Shiki looks at Fujino with those ominous eyes that Fujino felt before.

"That's why... if one exists, I could even kill a God."

Shiki runs. As gracefully as if she were walking. She approaches Fujino and pushes her down to the ground. Shiki straddles her. Fujino's throat trembles at facing Death so close to her.

"Are you... going to kill me?"

Shiki does not answer.

"Why are you going to kill me? I only killed because my wound was hurting."

Shiki laughs.

"That's a lie. Then why are you laughing? That time before, and even now. Why do you seem so happy?"

Fujino hesitates. She quietly places her hand over her mouth.

..... It's bent.

She did not know because she does not feel anything, but she is certainly smiling.....

My first murder. ... How did my face look in the pool of blood?

My second murder. ... How did my face look in the pool of blood?

I do not know why, but there was always an irritation. I was always irritated when I killed. Was that emotion... happiness? I could not feel anything even when I was raped, so I took pleasure in murder.....?

"In the end, you were enjoying it. You like hurting others. That's why that pain would never go away."

If the pain were to go away, Fujino would have no reason to kill. The wound will continue hurting, for the sake of Fujino herself.

"..... That is..... the answer?"

Fujino murmurs. She does not want to accept it. She does not want to think about it. She must be different to Shiki.....

"I told you, we are alike."

Shiki's knife moves. Fujino screams at the top of her lungs... For everything to *bend*.

The parking lot shakes. The ocean in the middle of the storm appears inside of Fujino's mind. Withstanding the burning in her brain, Fujino creates a fulcrum on either side of the bridge...

... And *bends*...

BOOM!

A tumultuous roar, like the crash of lightning, is heard . The metal foundation creaks and screams. The ground tilts and the ceiling starts to collapse. Fujino blankly stares at the building that is about to give way. The girl on top of her fell away as the world suddenly tilted. There is a storm outside, with the ocean below. If she falls without being able to grab onto something, she will surely die. Fujino takes command of her body, which is even having trouble breathing. She tells it that this place is going to collapse, so she has to get away from here. Dragging her nearly burned-out body, Fujino exits the parking lot. The shopping mall is relatively free of damage. The square corridor is now a rhombus.

Fujino walks, or at least she thinks she is walking... then falls. She cannot breathe. Her legs will not move. Her head is in a daze and she cannot think. What is there is..... yes, only the strong pain inside of her. For the first time, Fujino thinks she is going to die. It hurts so much. It is unbearable. It's better to just die than live on with this pain.

"..... Cough"

Laying face down, Fujino coughs out blood. On the ground, she is in a daze. In her whitewashed vision, she can only make out her blood. Red blood... red vision. The setting sun seems like it is burning...it always seems like it is burning...

"No..... I do not... want to die."

Fujino reaches out her arms. If her legs will not move, she will have to use her arms. Dragging her body, she inches forward. If she doesn't do so, Death will come for her. Fujino keeps moving. She can only sense pain. It hurts, it hurts, it hurts... those are the only words she can think about. It is the feeling of pain she finally obtained, but she hates it now. But..... It is true. It hurts... It really hurts, so she continues wishing. She does not want to die . She does not want to disappear. She has to keep living and do something. Because she has not done anything, or left anything behind...

That is too miserable.

That is too empty.

... That is too sad.

But it hurts. It hurts so much that the will to continue living might go numb and disappear . It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts. It hurts, but... .. Fujino moves her arms while still coughing up blood. What she repeats are the same words. For the first time in her life, Fujino wishes strongly.

... I want to live longer.

... I want to talk longer.

... I want to love longer.

... I want to stay here longer.....

But nothing moves now. Only the pain repeats. This is the true form of what she was enjoying. The truth hurts more than anything for Asagami Fujino. Now she truly understands the sins she has committed, the meaning of the blood she has spilled. The meaning is so heavy that she cannot even apologize. She only recalls the kind smile. *If that person were here... would he still hug me?* Her body convulses. The blood rolling up her throat tells her of the final pain about to come. That impact causes her light to go away. Now she can only see what is left in her . No, even that is fading away..... Not being able to stand

the loneliness of disappearing, Fujino talks aloud. Her true will that she has hidden so stubbornly. ... A small wish that she has dreamed of since she was small.

"..... It hurts. It hurts, Senpai. It really hurts... It hurts so much... I might cry... Mother, can I cry?"

... This is what she wanted to tell someone.

... If she could have said that on that day three years ago...

She cries. It hurts, it's sad, and it's so lonely that she can only cry. But just doing that eases the pain. That person has told her that pain is not something one bears but something one appeals to someone who loves them. Fujino is thankful she met him... really thankful for being able to see him once again before this...

"Are you in pain?"

At the end of the pain, Shiki is standing. She has a knife in one hand. Fujino turns over to face Shiki.

"You should have said so, if you were hurting."

Shiki says so in the end. ... The same words as in Fujino's memories. *Certainly*, Fujino thinks. Even if she could say that starting now, she might not have come down this road. That inconvenient, but normal life dances through her mind, but she cannot go back. She has committed too many sins. She has killed too many people. ... She has killed many people for the sake of her own happiness.

Asagami Fujino slowly stops her own breathing. Her sense of pain quickly disappears. It's fast.

She does not feel the pain of the knife that pierces her chest.

Remaining Sense of Pain /

5

As the storm is hitting town, I return to the office. I enter, wet with rain, and Touko-san greets me by dropping her cigarette.

"You're fast. It's only been a day."

"I heard a storm was coming so I came back before public transport stopped."

Touko-san nods while making a difficult face. I wonder if something is wrong... No, right now.....

"Touko-san, about Asagami Fujino. She was not born with her pain insensitivity. She was normal until she was six years old."

"What? That can't be true. Look, even though she has pain insensitivity, it's not affecting her physical activities. If you say the pain insensitivity came after she was born, a hollow spine would be the cause; but that causes

problems with physical activities. A rare case where she only lacks the sense of pain can only mean that she was born without it."

"Yes, that's what her personal doctor said too."

I want to tell her what happened in Nagano from the beginning but there's no time. I tell her about the Asagami family... no, the AsaGAMI family in a short summary.

"The AsaGAMI family was a respected family, but it went bankrupt when Fujino was around twelve years old . Fujino and her mother went to what is now the Asagami family. It seems the Asagami family is branched off from the AsaGAMI family, and they took care of the borrowed money out of greed for their land. Fujino had her sense of pain when she was small; but with it, she also had a strange power. They say she could bend things without touching them."

"... And?"

"She was hated as the devil. She received oppression too. But from the time Fujino turned six, the power had disappeared, along with her sense of pain."

"....."

Touko-san's expression changes. I can tell she's getting excited from her smile.

"After that she got a personal doctor, but there is no record of that at the AsaGAMI house. That place is empty now."

"That's all? You didn't investigate further!?"

"Of course I did. I found the personal doctor and talked to him."

"..... You're a smart worker, Kokutou."

"Yes, I followed the records and went to Akita. He is an underground doctor without a license, so it took me a whole day to get the story out of him."

"... I'm amazed. If you get fired from here you should become a detective. I'd even hire you as my personal detective."

I reply that I'll think about it, and continue on with my story.

"It seems this doctor only provided medicine. He said he doesn't know why Fujino became pain insensitive. He said that it was her father's doing alone."

"Her father did it himself? Do you mean curing her, or giving her the medicine?"

I nod to the small difference between the two.

"Giving her the medicine of course. According to the doctor, Fujino's father had no intention of curing Fujino's pain insensitivity. Most of the medicine that the doctor provided was Aspirin and Indometacin, steroids. According to the examination by the doctor, he says Fujino probably has Neuromyelitis Optica."

"Neuromyelitis optica..... Devic's disease, huh?"

Devic's disease. It is a type of myelitis and is a disease that causes numbness of the senses. Common symptoms are numbness in the lower legs and eyesight going bad. It even has the danger of making one blind. This disease requires early treatment with steroids. The steroids are what Touko-san mentioned before... what they call adrenocorticosteroid.

"In addition, they use Indometacin which numbs the sense of pain. I see. That would indeed make her like that. She's not inherent or posteriori. Asagami Fujino lost her senses artificially. It's the exact opposite of Shiki!"

Touko-san starts to laugh. It's a bit scary, she is like the professor I saw yesterday.

"Touko-san, what is this Indometacin?"

"It's a painkiller. It doesn't matter if it's peripheral or referred pain, pain occurs from reactions to "outside forces that might endanger life". An algescic substance is made inside your body which stimulates the nerves relating to pain. This triggers pain to your brain. It tells the brain that the body will die if it doesn't do something. You know what algescic substances are, right? There are things such as Kinin and Amin, as well as Arachidonic Acid metabolites which strengthen the two. Such things as Aspirin and Indometacin control the Prostaglandin which is in this Arachidon. The pain from Kinin and Amin isn't much, so taking in a lot of Indometacin would take away most of the pain."

Touko-san seems really happy, as she is relatively hyper.

To be honest, these Arachidon and Kinindon things seems like names of monsters to me.

"So it's a medicine to erase pain?"

"Not directly. If you want to erase the pain, a drug called opioid would do much better. There's the endorphin thing, right? It's that thing that the brain secretes to ease the pain. It works like that and opioid kills the pain in the central nervous system. Well, I guess all this has nothing to do with the subject. I see. Asagami Fujino's father decided to seal her power by sealing her senses. A family totally opposite of that of Ryougi, which tries so hard to make ones with power. But what's sad is that her power became stronger by doing that. Magi from in and around Egypt stitch their eyes shut to keep their Mana within them. What's the difference between them and Asagami Fujino?"

... I was prepared for Touko-san's words, but I'm still shocked. I knew already that the Asagami family has children with special powers, like those of Asagami Fujino... ones born with different channels. They despised those children and tried to seal their power by any means possible. The result of that is... pain insensitivity. To turn off the channel for "special powers",

they also closed the function of senses. That is why Asagami Fujino operates her power when her pain returns... because her sealed senses return.

"That's terrible. The only way for her to stay normal is to be abnormal."

That's right. Asagami Fujino could be in our world only by being abnormal in the form of pain insensitivity. But as long as she cannot feel anything, she cannot earn anything. She is only a ghost allowed to live in our world

.

"If she did not feel pain, she would not have killed anyone."

"Hey now, don't treat pain like it's a bad thing. Pain is a good thing. The bad thing is the wound, you shouldn't get this wrong. We need pain, no matter how much it hurts. People can recognize danger because they have pain. Do we move away from fire simply because it sets our hands on fire? No. It is because your hand is burning, and it hurts. If that's not the case, we would not know the danger of fire until our hand burnt off. It is right for pain to be painful, Kokutou. Anything that doesn't have that cannot understand other people's pain. Asagami Fujino

was hit in the back and got her sense of pain back temporarily. She defended herself for the first time from the pain she received after that. Those people that she didn't notice as dangerous before, she was able to recognize as dangerous because of pain. ... Still, killing them was too much."

... But Fujino does not feel pain. Those people died because of her defending herself, but they are partly responsible as they attacked her. You cannot make her bear all the responsibility.

"Touko-san, can she be cured?"

"There is no wound that cannot be cured. A wound that cannot be cured should be called "death"."

Touko-san indirectly calls Asagami Fujino's wound death. But the cause of these incidents is the stab wound in her stomach. If that pain comes back, if the cause of that pain is known.....

"Kokutou, her wound cannot be cured. It will only continue to hurt."

"Huh?"

"She had no wound to begin with, Kokutou."

.....Touko-san says something unexpected.

"Um... what do you mean by that?"

"Think about it. If you got stabbed in the stomach, would the wound heal by itself in a day or two?"

... That... is true but...

I get confused at the point Touko-san is making. It goes against all assumptions. Touko-san tries to hold back her laughter.

"Like you investigating Asagami Fujino's past, I also investigated Asagami Fujino's present. Fujino has not gone to any hospitals since the 20th. She did not even go to the personal doctor that she sees secretly."

"Personal... what!?"

Touko-san frowns in amazement.

"... You're good at searching for things but lack in insight. Look, the scariest thing for a pain insensitive person is something wrong with their body. Since they

do not have pain, they cannot know of any sicknesses they might have. As a result, they have a doctor look at them from time to time."

I see. She is completely right. Then... do Asagami Fujino's current parents not know of her pain insensitivity?

"The trigger was a trivial misunderstanding, Kokutou. Fujino was taken down by a guy with a knife and thought she was going to get stabbed. No, I bet she did almost get stabbed. Since her sense of pain returned at that time, she could use her power too. Cut or twist... Fujino happened to be first. As a result, the guy's neck was twisted off and his blood spilled onto Fujino's body. Fujino must have thought that she had been stabbed in the stomach."

I can clearly imagine the scene... I shake my head.

"But that's strange. If her sense of pain is back, she wouldn't make that kind of a mistake. She would not feel pain if she was not stabbed.

"Fujino was in pain from the start."

..... Huh?

"I was shown her status by her doctor. She has chronic Cecitis... what people mistakenly call Appendicitis. Well, I guess that is why she went to the doctor. The pain in the stomach is not the pain from the knife, but rather an internal pain. Her pain ached from time to time. If her sense of pain returned right before being stabbed, she would surely think that she was stabbed. If you are raised not knowing pain, you wouldn't even make sure if the wound is there or not. Fujino would look at the stabbed stomach, and even if it didn't have a wound, she would think that the wound must have healed."

"So... it's a misunderstanding?"

I say so weakly.

"The wound itself is. But the truth does not change. She was indeed on the edge. It doesn't matter if the knife was there or not. Her only way out was to kill them. If she did not kill, she would have been killed. Not her body but her mind. But unfortunately, Minato Keita got away. I don't think it would have turned out this bad if her revenge was completed then. It's just like Shiki said. It's too late."

Come to think of it, Shiki did repeat that. Why would it be too late? Is it because Fujino has committed murder? But then, that would be when she killed those four guys. I don't understand.

"Why is it too late?"

"Shiki must mean the mental part. Her murder is murder for up to five people. A murder other than those is not murder, but a massacre. It is not justified. That is what Shiki was angry about. ... Shiki has a taste for murder but she still understands unconsciously how important death is. That is why she does not kill indiscriminately like Asagami Fujino. Shiki cannot forgive Fujino for just doing as she wishes."

Is Asagami Fujino really doing as she wishes? To me, it seems like she is running away desperately. Touko-san continues.

"But what I mean by too late is the physical part. Cecitis perforate when left alone and become peritonitis. Inflammation comes with pain incomparable to that of the vermiform appendix. You could say it matches the pain of being stabbed with a knife. Then, one would start getting fevers and cyanosis. They may even go into shock

from lowered blood pressure. If it reaches the duodenum , you could die in half a day. It's been five days since the 20th. It should already have perforated. It's a shame, but it's fatal for her already."

How can this person say that with such a cool face?

"It's not too late yet. We have to find her quickly...!"

"Kokutou, our client for this is Asagami Fujino's father. He must have known about Fujino's power. That is why he heard about the incident and thought it must be Fujino's doing. The father said to "kill that monster". The only one that can protect her is wishing for her death. See , Kokutou, she has no salvation in any sense. And besides , Shiki already left."

"..... You idiot...!"

I scream at no one.

Broad Bridge is distorted like it has been squeezed by a giant hand. After coming here in the storm in Touko-san's buggy and arguing with the guard, Shiki shows up from under the bridge with a blood-soaked arm. The guard runs up to Shiki, but she tackles him and knocks him unconscious.

"Yo. For some reason, I thought you'd be here."

Shiki says this with a pale face. There were many things I wanted to say, but they all disappear when I see how weak she is. I run to help her, but Shiki refuses and does not even let me support her.

"So you managed with just one arm, huh, Shiki?"

Touko-san seems surprised. Shiki glares in discontent.

"Touko, she came up with clairvoyance in the end. She'll have a ridiculous amount of power if you leave her be."

"Clairvoyance, huh? Certainly, if you add that to her power, she'll be invincible. She would be able to make a fulcrum even if you are hiding... Huh? If you leave her be ...?"

"She returned to pain insensitivity at the very end. That's cheating. Asagami Fujino in that state can't be my target. I couldn't do anything else so I just killed the disease in her stomach. She might make it if you hurry."

Shiki did not kill Asagami Fujino. Understanding that, I quickly call the hospital. I'm not sure if they would be willing to come in this storm, but if they won't, I'll just take her there myself. Fortunately, her doctor agrees to come. He was worried when Fujino disappeared, and it seemed he was crying over the phone. There may not be many, but Fujino still has people on her side. I am moved . Behind me, those two are having a dangerous conversation.

"Did you stop the bleeding on that arm? It doesn't seem to be, at least."

"Yeah, I killed it 'cause it was useless. You can make an arm, right? You're a puppet master, after all."

"All right. That will be your pay for this job. I always thought that your body was too normal in contrast to your eyes. I can make that left arm able to grab spirits and such."

... I don't want them talking about such things.

"An ambulance is going to come here. It'll be lots of trouble to stay here, so do you want to get away?"

Touko-san nods, but Shiki is silent. ...She probably wants to make sure that Asagami Fujino does get taken away safely.

"Since I contacted them, I'll stay here. I'll tell you what happened, so you can go back."

"In this strong rain? You sure are strange. All right, let's go back, Shiki."

Shiki refuses Touko-san's offer. Touko-san smiles somewhat meanly and gets in her off-road buggy, which seems totally illegal.

"Shiki. Don't kill Kokutou just because you couldn't kill Asagami Fujino."

Touko-san says so seriously and drives off. In the summer rain, Shiki and I end up seeking shelter in the nearby warehouse.

The ambulance comes in no time and carries off Asagami Fujino. In this storm, I cannot see her face. I cannot make sure that she's the girl from that one night, but I think that's for the best. Shiki blankly stares into the night, wet from the rain. She was glaring at Fujino all this time. I inquire as to her feelings amid the sound of rain.

"Shiki, you still can't forgive Asagami Fujino?"

"..... I don't care about the one I already killed."

Shiki declares so. There's no hate or anything there. For Shiki, Fujino must be someone she does not know anymore. ... It's sad but that might be the best for these two. Shiki casts a glance at me.

"How about you? You say murder is wrong no matter what the reason is."

She seems like she's asking herself the question.

"... Yeah, but I sympathize with her. To be honest, I couldn't care less about Fujino killing the guys who violated her."

"That's unexpected. I was hoping for your popular opinion."

... Do you want to be blamed, Shiki? You didn't kill anyone. I close my eyes and listen to the rain.

"Really? But that is my opinion. Because, Shiki, even though she lost herself, Asagami Fujino is a normal girl. She will take in what she's done without changing the facts to suit her. Even if she does give herself up to the police, no one can prove what she's done and she won't be socially responsible for her sins. That's what makes it more difficult."

"Why?"

"..... I think sins are things people willingly burden themselves with. A burden that one casts on themselves according to their views, that is what a sin is. The more compassion you have, the heavier a burden your sin becomes. The more common sense you have, the heavier a burden your sin becomes. Asagami Fujino's sins become heavier and more painful as she gets happier."

Shiki tells me I'm too good-natured.

"Then does that mean those without compassion have no sense of what sin is?"

"I don't think anyone exists without a sense of sin. It just means that their sins are lighter to bear, but they are still there. A small sin within their small scope of compassion. For us it might seem trivial, like tripping on a road; but for that person, it becomes a burden. Even the small pain for us becomes an unpleasant feeling for those with small compassion. No matter the weight, the meaning of a sin is the same."

... Yes. For example, Minato Keita was probably frightened to the point of insanity because of the realization of his sins. He cannot atone for his regret, sense of guilt, fear, or impatience; all he can do is *try* to atone for them.

"Certainly, it must be easier to not be responsible for your sins socially. But if no one punishes you for your sins, you have to carry them yourself. A guilty conscience is not something that goes away, right? You have memories of it. Since no one forgave you for it, you cannot forgive yourself. The wound in your heart never heals and will continue to hurt. Like her sense of pain remaining, the wound would never heal. As you say, a

soul does not have a physical form..... so I don't think a wound on it can be treated.

Shiki is listening silently. Maybe because I looked up Fujino's past, I'm unusually poetic. Shiki suddenly leaves the cover of the warehouse and goes out into the rain.

"So you're saying this: the more common sense you have, the more sense of sin you have. That's why there are no bad people in this world. But I have no such thing. Could you let such a person run unbounded?"

Now that she says so, that is indeed true. Before you can call Shiki good or bad, she has a small concept of common sense.

"I see. Then I guess it can't be helped. I'll have to bear all your sins then."

Those are my true feelings. They seem to have caught Shiki off guard, as she stands there dumbfounded. After being struck by the rain for a while, Shiki murmurs uncomfortably.

"... I finally remember... You say those kinds of jokes with a straight face."

To be honest, Shiki found it hard to deal with such things.

"..... *Sigh* I see. I do think I can at least carry one girl on me, you know."

I argue timidly, and Shiki laughs.

"I'll confess one more thing, I think I've borne another sin with this thing today. But I found out something in return. What my life is, and what I want. It's vague and fragile, but I will have to follow it for now. It turns out that what I'm following isn't as ugly as I thought it was. I'm a bit happy. A bit... A killing impulse that is slightly leaning towards your image..."

... I can only frown at her last sentence, but Shiki is beautiful as she smiles against the rain. The storm should go away by morning.

I keep staring at Shiki, surrounded by the summer rain . Come to think of it, this is the first true smile she's ever shown me since she recovered from the coma...

Remaining Sense of Pain Fin
